UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL IN A LOW SOCIOECONOMIC AREA

BY

MARIE CLAIRE NOONAN

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

FALL 1997

National Library of Canada
Acquisitions and Bibliographic Services
395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque nationale du Canada
Acquisitions et services bibliographiques
395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

0-612-23046-5

Canada

University of Alberta

Library Release Form

Marie Claire Noonan

Students' Experience of Community and School in a Low Socioeconomic Area

Doctor of Philosophy

1997

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Library to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly, or scientific research purposes only.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis, and except as hereinbefore provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatever without the author's prior written permission.

Marie Claire Noonan

23 Collier Road North
Thorold, Ontario
Canada
L2V 2W8

September 4, 1997.

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL IN A LOW SOCIOECONOMIC AREA by Marie Claire Noonan in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

W. G. Maynes

W. G. Maynes, Supervisor

M. Haughey

M. Haughey

Beata Young

B. Young

T. Carson

T. Carson

R.G.M. for

D. MacKinnon, External Examiner

R. G. McIntosh

R. G. McIntosh, Committee Chair

Date: September 2, 1997

Dedicated to my brother

Séan Dennis Vincent Noonan

1956 - 1990

Abstract

Students' Experience of Community and School in a Low Socioeconomic Area examines how students from a low socioeconomic area experienced their relationships with the school and community. The students participating in this study shared their experiences of schooling and attempted to critically analyze their stories to understand the influence that social structures have had on their education. The emphasis in this study was on understanding the experiences of the students through the hearing, sharing and claiming of stories. Group discussions were the centerpiece of the data gathering methodology.

The findings attempted to present the students' understandings in their own words. Through the various levels of data analysis five themes emerged: 1) relationship between the school and community, 2) empowerment, 3) claiming an education: student voice, 4) change, and 5) poverty stereotypes.

This study found that family and community directly influence low socioeconomic students' understanding of education. Further research could examine the role parents and the community could play in the empowerment of students from a low socioeconomic background.

This study has demonstrated the need to trust the voices of students in the development of their education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to express her sincere appreciation to the many people who assisted in this study.

I am very grateful to the students who participated in this study. Thank you for trusting me enough to share your stories.

I would like to thank Dr. Bill Maynes, my thesis advisor. The support, guidance and patience that you so generously provided have been invaluable throughout my journey.

I was fortunate, not only to have had Dr. Margaret Haughey as a committee member, but also to have had the opportunity to be one of her research assistants for three years. Thank you for all of your help and support.

Dr. Beth Young, Dr. Terry Carson, and Dr. Gordon McIntosh, the remaining members of the committee, offered valuable insights and advice throughout the development and completion of this study. Their guidance improved the quality of the research and strengthened the final draft of this thesis.

To my parents, Claire and Joseph, I am deeply grateful for the encouragement, life preparation and love you have always provided. To my siblings Tim, Kerry, Deirdre and Patrick, thank you for the support of your love, humour and belief in me.

To the friends who gave their understanding and support and the colleagues who provided valuable insight.

A special thank you to Dr. Raymond Downie, for his gifts of friendship, time and love. Your advice, patience and generosity helped me to survive this journey.

Finally, thank you to my many teachers over the years, who have shared their wisdom with me and to the many students whom I have had the privilege of teaching; both have taught me some of life's most important lessons.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
Coming to the Question	2
Research Questions	4
The Journey of My Research	5
Background to the Study	6
Pilot Study	11
Terminology	13
My Story	14
Conclusion	18
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	19
Social Theories	19
Critical Theory	20
Reproduction Theory	20
Resistance Theory	21
Theories of Poverty	22
Cyclical Theory of Poverty	22
The Culture of Poverty	24
Structural Theory of Poverty	26
Hidden Curriculum	29
Academic Performance and Poverty	30
Nature of Low Socioeconomic Community	31
Family Support	33
Educational Experiences	34
Empowerment in Schools	36
Summary	38

CHAPTER III:

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY 39

Interpretive Paradigm 39

The Nature of Naturalistic Inquiry 40

Axiom 1 41

Axiom 2 41

Axiom 3 42

Axiom 4 42

Axiom 5 43

Summary 43

Methodology 44

Constructivist Paradigm 44

Critical Action Research 46

Application of Methodology 49

Participants 54

Standards of Rigor 55

Credibility 55

Transferability 55

Dependability 55

Confirmability 56

Ethical Considerations 56

Assumptions 56

Limitations and Delimitations 57

Summary 57

CHAPTER IV: DESCRIPTION OF FINDINGS 59

Setting and Students 61

Local Community of the School 61

Students in the Group 62
Group Dynamics and Researcher's Role 69
My Role as Researcher 69
First Day 70
Initial Interviews 71
Visiting the Classroom 72
Group Dynamics 74
Group Rules 74
Whose Agenda 76
Role of Silence 78
Trust 79
Comfort Level 79
What it Meant to Be in the Group 80
Topics 81
Family Influence 81
Family Life 82
Money Concerns 84
Family Secrets 86
Educational Expectations 87
Parental Intervention with Teacher 89
Environment 90
Safety in the Neighborhood 91
Safety in School 92
Student Maturity 94
Violence 97
Racism 100
Poverty 105

Power 109
Teacher's Power Over Students 109
Student Survival Strategies 115
Peer Support 119
Good Teaching 120
Discipline 121
Summary 124
CHAPTER V: INTERPRETATIONS 125
Themes 125
Relationship between the School and Community 125
Safety in the School and Neighborhood 126
Characteristics of a Low Income Community 129
Empowerment 133
Students' Understanding of Power 134
When Students Feel Empowered 138
Empowerment for Whom? 139
Student Diversity 144
Empowerment and Change 145
Talk as Empowerment 146
Disempowerment 147
Claiming an Education: Student Voice 149
Student Responsibility 149
Claiming Stories 151
Change 151
Change in the Students 152

Thinking Critically 152
Poverty Stereotypes 154
At Risk Stereotypes 155
Students' Poverty Stereotypes 156
Teacher's Poverty Stereotypes 157
Summary 159
CHAPTER VI:
REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 160
Reflections on Application of Methodology 160
Interpretive Study 161
Group Influences 162
Journals 163
Dwelling Place 164
Positive and Negative Aspects of the Application of the Methodology 164
A Further Discussion of the Findings 166
Family Influence 166
Environment 168
Empowerment 169
Recommendations for Practice 172
Suggestions for Further Research 174
Finally 176
REFERENCES 177

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."
Gospel of St. Luke 12:34

During my 10 years of teaching, I have not worked with "mainstream" students. Not all of my students have been poor or from a minority group, but the one characteristic that they have all had in common is that they were from groups with little influence on the educational system. They had little impact in determining the content and curriculum, the pedagogy, and the values of education.

From my experience with these students, I learned that the educational system is not a neutral enterprise. The educational system of a country, province, or school board is strongly influenced by the social group with the greatest power. It stands to reason that the interests and values of this group not only exert pressure, but also shape much of what is done within the educational system. The potential for civil unrest does empower minority groups, but the power they are given does not alter their low social status, nor does it increase their social control. Even when minority groups are acknowledged in the educational plan, they are dealt with from a mainstream perspective. They are expected to adapt to the established system and, if they are unable to do so, they are rejected by the system. This further restricts their future possibilities. In a sense, they are oppressed by an educational system designed to meet the needs of other students.

I was very much a part of the oppression of the students with whom I worked. I did my best to aid, encourage, and force them to adapt to the educational mainstream. I believed that, as a teacher, I should work together with colleagues to help these students who were outside the

mainstream, through an educational system that was part of the mainstream. I thought that if these students could achieve success in the educational system, then their futures would be secure. From my middle class perspective, the logic was compelling: if I had been successful in the educational system then, with some hard work, they could be as well. I was misinformed. In order for these students to succeed as I had in the educational system, it was necessary for them to be better than I was, to work harder and overcome obstacles that I hadn't faced. The structural oppression that exists in schools ensures that very few minority students are successful. While I may have empathized with the struggles that these students faced, I did not realize that this system was oppressing them.

What is oppression? It may mean something different to the oppressor and the oppressed. In trying to understand what oppression means to students and the part that I play in it, it was necessary for me to listen to what students have to say about their educational development. I began to wonder how students who are outside the mainstream experience the educational enterprise.

Coming to the Question

Through this study I examined how students from a low socioeconomic area experienced their relationship with the school and community. The students participating in this study shared their experiences of schooling and attempted to critically analyze their stories to understand the influence that social structures have had on their education. The critical aspect of this study gave the students the opportunity to not only share their personal stories but also to understand the reasons they receive the schooling they do. It was a vehicle for students to examine the educational and social structures that determine

the composition of their schooling. Within the meaning of "critical analysis" is the notion of empowerment. I believe that talk itself can be empowering and that providing the students with the opportunity to share their stories empowered them to claim their authentic voices in their schooling. The emphasis in this study was on understanding the experiences of the students through the hearing, sharing and claiming of stories.

Critical researchers who work with school children face an ethical problem related to the potential that instigating change in impressionable young minds can be harmful to both students and the teachers. My first intention was to conduct a "critical action research" study, but to begin with "interpretive" research to explicate the realities and the perspectives of the students. As I began to explore the students' experiences I confronted constraints pertaining to the ethical problem noted above. I chose to deal with the constraints by working for the most part within the interpretive paradigm, but always with a "critical edge." This shift within the research design will be addressed further in Chapter VI.

My thinking about critical action research methodology has been strongly influenced by my own beliefs about social justice. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) defined action research as a "form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices" (p. 5). Critical action research must be collaborative, but it is the critically examined action of the individuals in the group that acts as the catalyst for group reflection. My role with the students who participated in the study was as a participant, but I also observed and examined the situation from the viewpoint of the students, building on this information

and working with the students to examine potential ways to implement our critically informed plans for change.

My broader concern is "the relationship with learners to the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 106) and the hope for higher educational expectations that this process will bring. I hope that the experiences these students shared will help educators understand the structures that we impose on such students.

Research Questions

My general research question was: In what ways do a group of Grade 6 students from a low socioeconomic area experience their community and school environments? This set the tone for the group discussions which were the centerpiece of the data gathering methodology. I was interested in having the students share their experiences and impressions of their school and community and in having them reflect on why their lives are this way and what they could do to improve the situation.

The study was influenced by four subsidiary questions:

1. How does a group of students in a low socioeconomic area experience the relationship between the school and neighborhood?

2. How does the nature of the low socioeconomic neighborhood affect the school environment?

3. In what circumstances do students from a low socioeconomic area feel empowered in the school environment?

4. In what circumstances do students from a low socioeconomic area feel disempowered in the school environment?

In the original research proposal there was a fifth subsidiary question: In what way does the level of community involvement in the educational system relate to student empowerment? This was not included

in the analysis of the findings because this issue was not addressed in the group discussions. I attempted to raise this issue with the students, but most of them no longer lived in the community and therefore did not find this issue to be relevant.

These questions are rooted in the belief that we need to examine critically institutional and interpersonal relationships, through which issues of knowledge in the classroom become issues of power (Apple, 1990; Giroux, 1992). The examination of the relationship between the school and community provided a means of exploring issues of knowledge and power in the classroom. The nature of the low socioeconomic community can affect that relationship. Maynes (1990) looked at how factors such as low financial base, violence, substance abuse, and transience are aspects of low socioeconomic communities. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds bring these aspects of the community into the classroom, and this influences how they experience the relationship between the school and the community. This does not always have negative repercussions. For example, Maynes noted that some urban poor students live in families that place considerable value on education as a way for students to advance, and that this is part of the experience that the student brings to the classroom.

The Journey of My Research

I began the journey of my doctoral research with a passion for social justice and a desire to explore the effects of poverty on education. The literature I read on poverty and education showed that there is an inequality of educational opportunity for the poor. As Young (1990) pointed out, Canadians may believe that all students have equal opportunities for academic success but the realities that impoverished Canadian children proves that this belief is inaccurate. To know that

poverty influences educational opportunity requires a critical analysis of the social structures that form the educational enterprise. It is for this reason that I examined the relationship between poverty and education from a socially critical perspective.

I hold a strong belief that having an understanding of how low socioeconomic students experience schooling equips teachers with the knowledge of what these students need in their schooling. I decided that the most effective way to understand how low socioeconomic students experience school is through the students' voices. A graduate level course in action research also influenced my choice of methodology. I believe that interpretive research with a critical inclination enables the authentic voices of students to be heard and provides the necessary social critique of education and poverty.

Background to the Study

Narrative accounts of teaching in inner-city classrooms (McLaren, 1989; Solnicki, 1992) provided glimpses of students struggling to make sense of their world in the face of extreme racism, sexism, violence, and alcohol and drug abuse. It is important to avoid prejudging or stereotyping what is occurring, but the voices of the students, in conjunction with those of the principals interviewed by Maynes (1990) in his study of Edmonton's urban-poor schools, suggest a strong need to find out more about the experiences of students in low socioeconomic areas. I wanted the students who participated in my study to express their feelings, ideas, and attitudes about the educational system and to claim their stories of the learning experiences. I approached this study from the point of view of someone who believes in social justice, liberation, and feminism.

My belief in social justice is what makes me question the purposes of education, how people expect to be treated, and how they are actually treated. Stevens and Wood (1987) examined Aristotle's definition of justice, and identified two different standards of reference: objective legal justice which is based on all parties being treated as equals, and fair distribution which functions in terms of proportion. They pointed out that these two principles do not take into account that not everyone agrees on how we decide who and what deserves to be rewarded. Their critique of Aristotle's perspective on justice introduces the interconnection of the concepts of justice, authority, and power and the way that they are socially practiced. In educational practices there are social expectations of equality and fairness, but what is meant by equal educational opportunity? If equal educational opportunity for a student does not mean the identical opportunity, but opportunity that is fair relative to that type of student, then classification and tracking of students are subject to the educational organization's bias. Even when equal educational opportunity is legally regulated, the reward system is unfair. Rawls (1971) stated that this system is unfair because the rewards are made on the basis of talents, characteristics, and attitudes that stem from genetic and environmental factors and not from the individual's choices. The educational system rewards "characteristics that were an accident of birth" (p. 88). Making social justice an expectation of the educational system challenges the foundations of educational policy because it means critically reexamining the ideological foundations of education.

My understanding of liberation as a social and political force began with my introduction to the work of Paulo Freire. Freire (1971) said that authentic liberation is the process of humanization. He stated that

liberation requires critical thought and is a praxis that he defined as "the action and reflection of men upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 66). According to Freire, those people who are committed to the cause of liberation reject the orthodox view that consciousness is an empty vessel to be filled. In *A Pedagogy for Liberation* (Shor & Freire, 1987) Freire stressed that the critical development of the individual is absolutely fundamental for the radical transformation of society but, at the same time, that "liberation is a social act. Liberating education is a social process of illumination" (p. 109). McLaren and Leonard (1993) asserted that understanding liberation as a social process rather than just a theory makes it "a certain type of reasoning process that is undertaken as part of action both in and on the world" (p. 54). They explained that Freirean pedagogy is a combination of theory and practice that together create a dialectical praxis. Liberation for an educator is more than a theory to espouse, it is a model for practice. I brought a belief in this model to this study.

My feminist beliefs stem from my concern with social justice and liberation. Critiques from social justice and liberation orientations have informed my understanding of the concepts of power, authority, and hierarchy and brought me to an understanding my own oppression as a woman. I am interested in feminism as an extension of the praxis that Freire (1971) described as liberation. I believe that feminism is about social change and is a politic of transformation of the sort that Briskin and Coulter (1992) described. They characterized feminist pedagogy as acknowledging "the classroom as a site of gender, race, and class inequalities and simultaneously a site of political struggle and change" (p. 250). Feminism and feminist pedagogies challenge the normative. My

belief in feminist pedagogy does not mean that I reject the male-authored critical theorists' texts. Freire may have written about liberation without considering gender, but his model of critical pedagogy invites a critical interrogation by feminists. Feminist author bell hooks (1991) made the point that this blind spot of Freire's work should not lead to a dismissal. In trying to describe her relationship with Freire's work and her own feminist theories, hooks (1993) said, "I have taken threads of Paulo's work and woven them into that version of feminist pedagogy I believe my work as writer and teacher embodies" (p. 150). My views on critical theory are extended to include issues of gender and race.

Critical theory is a way in which to question how we organize society and our lives. Foster (1986) explained that critical theory examines sources of social domination and repression, but "with the caveat that since we ultimately make our worlds, we can ultimately change them" (p. 72). Foster asserted that critical theory is committed to acknowledging values, and "its critique is largely oriented toward how created social structures impede the attainment of such values as democracy and freedom" (p. 72).

I believe the tenets of critical theory apply to this study because the assumptions about the functions of schooling are challenged and an examination of the reasons for differential success across various social groups occurs (Paul, 1992). Critical theory also challenges teachers to base their practice on an emancipatory praxis that empowers students (Blackmore & Kenway, 1993). Central to this way of thinking is that students outside the mainstream are oppressed by the educational system and should react against this oppression.

There is however, a major problem with the application of critical theory to this study. There is a presumption in critical theory that all

students from outside the mainstream are the same in the sense that differences amongst students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are ignored. This means that irrespective of their differences, all students can achieve empowerment through similar means. In commenting on this matter, Burstyn (1993) maintained that traditional views of critical theory assume a "neutrality of the equal value" with respect to empowerment. This position does not take into account the impact of class, race, and gender. Feminist critical theory acknowledges this and suggests a different approach. This alternative approach implies that imposed views of what people ought to do to empower themselves is an alternative means of domination that discounts multiple realities (Luke & Gore, 1992). Freire and Macedo (1993) addressed the issue of gender in critical theory and Freire admitted, "I do recognize the sexual differences which position both men and women in different oppressive locations. . . . The feminists of the 1990s are being critical of the treatment of gender in my work, but I wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* twenty years ago" (p. 175).

Weiler (1988) explained that critical feminist educational theory begins with the assumption that schooling is connected to the class structure and economic system of capitalism and that "capitalism and patriarchy are related and mutually reinforcing of each other" (p. 29). Feminist critical theory examines the issues of gender, class, and race in social theory.

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are not a homogeneous group; there are differences in gender, race, culture, finances, and family background. Given my belief in feminist critical theory I examined how these various elements shape individual students' understandings of their relationship with the school.

Pilot Study

In the pilot study I spent two weeks of half days in a grade six class in an urban school situated in a low socioeconomic area. This was an elementary school with grades kindergarten to six. I observed the entire class, but I worked closely with a group of five students. I met daily with this group of students for discussions that lasted from twenty minutes to an hour. I also interviewed the classroom teacher, the principal, the community coordinator and the native liaison coordinator. I spent time in the school and in the community surrounding the school.

The main focus of the study was the group of five students. The group discussions focused on their educational experiences and the role that the school had in their lives. We talked about their opinions, concerns and attitudes about the school and their education. I initiated the original discussions by asking the students questions about the importance of education, how far they thought they would go with their education and their parents' views on education. The students became very excited about sharing their views and quickly selected the topics they wanted to discuss. They were told that they could talk about anything they wanted. I participated in the group discussions, but I was interested in hearing what the students had to say. My role was that of facilitator rather than group member. The students also wrote individual daily journals. During the discussions they were encouraged to share their journals with the group. Some of the students chose to do this but, for most, the journals were a private communication with me. I read them daily and wrote responses.

The group of students with whom I worked were the top academic students in the class. They were articulate, and not afraid to say what they thought. The group discussions concerned the students' views on education

but they would also talk about their home lives and the problems that they faced.

The themes that emerged from the group discussions with the students related to: their educational futures, the role their parents played in their education, poverty in their school and community, definition of community, and the place of students in the classroom.

The experience of the pilot study helped me to understand how students in low socioeconomic situations experience poverty. To these students, poverty was not something "bad" which had to be changed. Poverty was simply the reality that they lived. This made me examine the question of whether poverty is problematic because of the middle class perspective I bring to its meaning. This study also gave me a better understanding of how to approach the students and helped me to establish reference points with respect to what I should and should not say. The students told me that there were some family issues that they did not want to discuss at school, and they gave me a powerful message with their silence on some issues. If we discussed subjects that some students were sensitive about (poverty, family violence, family break-ups), they were protective of each other. This taught me that even though they were willing to share their stories, it would be on their terms and I was still the outsider. Through this experience I realized that I would have to respect the boundaries that the students set and accept the limits that this might put on my study. Through this pilot study I became much more aware of the power of the students' stories.

The pilot study forced me to examine my understanding of the terms: community, hidden curriculum and poverty. I realized that there are two different types of education, one for lower socioeconomic students and the

other for higher socioeconomic students. This is something that students who live in poverty know quite well. What this group of students taught me was how they cope with this situation. Coping and survival were the main foci of the school in the pilot study because, as the principal explained to me, "If the students don't have enough food to eat then you aren't worried about curriculum."

Terminology

The meaning I give to different terms in this study has been greatly influenced by the pilot study. The term *community* is used in this study to mean the locale or environment surrounding a school. This includes family values that a student brings into the classroom. It is also necessary to look at the central position that the school has in the community. The principal of the inner-city pilot school described the school as being the hub of the community because of the involvement of various social service groups. These groups are involved in helping the school, but they also help parents of students. The community school has become a dependable and safe place for students and other community members. The native liaison coordinator told me that, "Some of these parents wake up in the morning and don't have any food to give to their children. Schools are the only way their children have any safety. It's the only place where they know their children will be taken care of."

A *low socioeconomic area* is viewed as an area where the majority of the inhabitants have an annual income of less than $15,000. The study was done in a community in which the poor constitute a large portion of the residents.

The term *poverty* refers to a standard of living that the Canadian Welfare Council has determined is below the poverty line. I asked the

classroom teacher from the pilot study if he could define poverty. In turn he asked, "Do you mean physical poverty, mental poverty, spiritual poverty?" I responded, "Well, what does it mean to you, what does it mean to the students in your class?" He replied, "They experience all the types of poverty and we work at all of them." "How?" I wondered. To which he said, "We provide food, give them support to learn. The spiritual poverty is really the saddest. We show them that we care, that we believe in them." My understanding of the term poverty was thus expanded to include the mental and spiritual poverty that often accompanies economic poverty.

The phrase *status quo* refers to the existing state of affairs in the educational system.

Empowerment is taken to mean the act of an oppressed person in a minority situation in taking authority over structural oppression.

My Story

I have written this section to explain how my experiences have influenced my understanding of poverty. I decided the most effective way for me to do this is to present various vignettes of moments in my life that deeply affected my understanding of society and the role I play in society.

My teaching career began on a Cree Reservation in Northern Saskatchewan. I deliberately chose to work on a reserve because I wanted the opportunity to live and work with native people. It was an experience that was both rewarding and growth-filled. It also challenged my values and beliefs in a way that only living in another culture could do. I was taught the valuable lesson that not every society has the same rules. I had to learn to respect the rules of another society and the fact that people did things differently from what I had come to expect. I learned this lesson in a very poignant way.

I had a grade eight/nine homeroom made up of a group of energetic students who took delight in "breaking in" a first year teacher. After one of my lunch hour duties, one of my students broke the glass in the fire extinguisher container. When I caught him and chastised him, he swore at me. I decided that I needed to take immediate disciplinary action to let that student (and the rest of my class, who witnessed all of this) know he could not get away with this. His guardian (whom he called auntie) was a Cree teacher at the elementary school and I called her to let her know what happened. She left her class and came right over to talk to me and the student. The three of us were alone in the classroom while the rest of my class waited outside. I told her the story. In Cree she asked the student if he had done this and he answered in English, "Yes." She instantly slapped him across the face so hard that his glasses flew across the room and smashed on the floor. She then turned around and left. I was numb and for a few seconds there was silence. I told the student to take some time alone before he came back to class. When he left the room, the rest of the students filed in. For the first time, nobody talked as they sat down. I sat at my desk, fought back my tears and told them to take out their novels and read. One of the older female students quietly came up to my desk and put her arm on my shoulder and said, "It's all right, you didn't know." She was right, I had not known the consequences that my actions would involve. I did not realize that having the student present while I explained to his guardian in an angry and indignant tone what he had done was, within the Native culture, a humiliating experience for this woman. She was one of the few people from the reserve that had succeeded in school and had obtained the necessary credentials to teach. She was judged by the reserve and external educational officials as an educational success. As a teacher

who was part of the foreign educational system imposed on her culture, I had questioned her ability to control a child for whom she was responsible. I also implied in my judgmental tone, that I expected her to do something about this child's bad behaviour. She complied with my "demand." I was putting that teacher in a situation in which she had no choice but to act the way she did. The rules in this society were different from the ones that I knew. It took a student being struck for me to understand that, if I wanted to know different cultures and the people in these cultures, then I had to be more adaptable. I learned that my way of doing things was merely that--my way--and not a more correct or acceptable way.

In August 1985 I left Canada for a 2 1/2 year teaching position in rural Kenya. I was going to an area to which tourists did not go, to an African village in which I would be one of the few whites. I went as a volunteer for Volunteer International Christian Services, a lay group formed by the Spiritans, a Roman Catholic order of priests. Before I left for Kenya, Father Dermot Doran, the priest who runs the organization, warned me that I was not going to a developing country to criticize or publicly protest the conditions that I saw. I was going there to learn, to help build bridges of understanding. This would be done, he told me, by listening. It was through listening to people, that I gained their trust and they gave me the great gift of their stories. I would never understand the world or my life the same way. It was the people in a rural Kenyan village, who gave me this insight. They taught me the value of listening.

In 1990 I went to Hong Kong for two years and taught at a Canadian school. While I was there, I did some volunteer work. In one of the world's richest cities, I worked with the poor. I had an opportunity to visit one of the Vietnamese refugee camps, where Hong Kong kept the numerous "boat

people" who started arriving after the Vietnam war. I was asked to take the children, who had been born in the heavily guarded camps, to a nearby beach so they could play in a place that was not surrounded with barbed wire. When we returned to the camp, one of the "residents" invited me to his family's quarters to share a small meal with his wife and children. The living quarters of the camp were huge warehouse-like buildings where families lived in caged bunks. There were three tiers of bunks and his family's was the top tier, which I was told was the safest. We climbed up and sat in their "cage" and on a small charcoal cooker, his wife made me a dinner of pork dumplings. I looked around and was struck by the generosity of this family and the dignity that they brought to what I perceived to be a horrible situation. He had been a doctor in Vietnam, and now his family lived in a cage, and yet there was no bitterness. The dignity that this family showed is the same dignity I saw in the students in my study. I may have looked at this family, and the students in my study with sympathy, but they were not interested in my pity. This generous and gracious Vietnamese family taught me a valuable lesson about the people society labels as "poor": they do not see themselves as lower than others in society. It is a middle class bias that judges their situations as tragic and desperate. Even the poorest people in Hong Kong had a dignity that society could not take away.

One of the most valuable lessons I learned through my exposure to various cultures and environments is that poverty is not an abstract notion. It has a very human face. In remembering some "moments" that became life lessons for me, I see the many faces of the people I knew and who make these stories so real for me. I took a picture of the students who participated in this study and I kept it above my desk so that I would

remember to honour them and keep their stories real. One of the most difficult aspects of this study for me was to leave the lives of these students behind. I could listen to the stories of their lives and feel compassion, but then I would go back to my middle class world and security. Although we shared a lot of laughter, this study brought me a lot of tears because there is a lot of sadness for children who grow up in poverty.

Conclusion

The question that remained central to my understanding of the data is how students from a low socioeconomic background experience education. What I had hoped would happen in this study was that this group of students would feel empowered in their education. In doing this study, I was reminded of a lesson I thought I had learned a long time ago: nothing prepares you for the painful truths of the lives of children who live in poverty. To analyze the stories that they shared with the group required that I distance myself from the emotional impact that their stories have had on me. The "bigger picture" of this study always comes back to the honest and frank stories that this small group of students shared. Perhaps the empowerment of these students occurred in a simple way that I had not understood before we began. At the end of the study, the students told me that the main reason they liked being in this group was because, "You listened to what we had to say." For this group of eleven year-olds from a low socioeconomic community, empowerment was simple and profound: someone listened.

CHAPTER II

A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

"You carried your own burden and very soon
your symptoms of privilege disappeared."
Seamus Heaney, 1987

This literature review concentrates on issues related to education and poverty, particularly on the effect that poverty has on education. Levin (1985) stated that education has been perceived as a major vehicle for social mobility and is thus capable of generating programs that would destroy poverty. Maynes (1990) claimed that current literature on poverty and education supports the position that schools can make a considerable difference in enhancing the success rates of poor children.

This chapter begins with a broad overview of three social theories under the headings: "Critical Theory," "Reproduction Theory" and "Resistance Theory" and continues with a more detailed examination of two theories of poverty under the headings: "Cyclical Theory of Poverty" and "Structural Theory of Poverty". This is followed by sections entitled "Academic Performance and Poverty" and "Empowerment in Schools."

Social Theories

Critical theory, resistance theory and reproduction theory provide explanations of social structures and power relationships that are established through these structures. The three theories offer perspectives on the causes for the presence of poverty in Canada. According to Rothstein (1995), critical theory is "the major influence on the critical education community", and "other more specific theories" (p. 6), such as reproduction theory and resistance theory, have grown from critical theory.

Critical Theory

Critical theorists believe that the institutions and structures that organize society operate to "keep in place fundamentally unequal and unjust social and political relations " (Rothstein, 1995, p. 6). In order to change the oppressive systems that govern our lives, critical theorists maintain that we must first become aware of the exploitative structures in which we live and work, and then participate in a collective struggle to overcome the oppressive conditions. Education, critical theorists argue, is the key. Joel Spring (1991) explains that this means "giving students the knowledge and skills they need to struggle for a continued expansion of political, economic, and social rights" (p. 30).

Reproduction and resistance theories, according to Rothstein (1995) can be seen as branches of the broader critical social theory category. The more specific theories of reproduction and resistance have been "influenced by the general principles held by critical theorists" (p. 6).

Reproduction Theory

Reproduction theory reflects the belief that there are "corresponding unequal and stratified social relations found between schools and the larger society " (Rothstein, 1995, p. 7). Reproduction theorists believe that the main function of schools is to reproduce the economic system and to perpetuate inequitable social divisions. Apple (1979) and Giroux (1981) argued that this process is achieved in the school structure through its emphasis on control and the overt and hidden curriculum. Reproduction theory raises questions about whose interests education serves.

Resistance Theory

Resistance theory provides the perspective that the process of reproduction explained in reproduction theory can be resisted. Resistance theory leads to an examination of the daily lives of students and their coping strategies in the educational enterprise. The ways in which students survive their educational experiences depends on their social status. Resistance theorists found that post-secondary bound students know what is required to get the marks necessary for admission into university. Rothstein (1995) explains that these students "know how to play the game in education. They know how to please the teachers and administrators. They usually win the game" (p. 8). Rothstein stresses that they do not succeed because they "buy into the game" (p. 8) but rather because they know how to succeed in the system without believing in the system. Their resistance comes in the form of a subculture that is much more relevant to them. Their success in the system obtained through knowing how to play the game, provides them with access to higher paying employment and ensures their successful place in society.

Willis (1977) found that the resistance of working class students is much more overt. These students also have an understanding of the rules of the system, but they reject the system by either refusing to play the game, or by disrupting or defying it. The resistance of working class students also assures their place in social structure; they will not succeed in the educational enterprise and not have access to better paying employment.

Critical theories in education "begin with a willingness to question our taken-for-granted assumptions about . . . schools' ability to guarantee equality of opportunity" (Rothstein, 1995, p. 6). Through exploration of

theories of reproduction and resistance, critical theorists analyze the ways that inequality and oppression are created and institutionalized in society. Theories of poverty provide critical examinations of who the poor are in society and why the conditions of poverty exist. The next section includes an examination of two theories of poverty: cyclical theory and structural theory.

Theories of Poverty

Poverty theorists believe that the poor in society are not a random group. The poor in high-wage economies are usually determined by "drawing a poverty line across the total income distribution, at a point fixed by some calculations about minimum food needs for families" (Connell, 1993, p. 21). The poor in Canada, according to Statistics Canada (1988), are those individuals or households which must spend 58.5% or more of total income on food, shelter, and clothing. The poor do not fit the stereotype of "undeserving or lazy", rather they are those in society who struggle to survive. According to Connell, "The poor are precisely those with the least assets" (p. 24).

The following section is on the cyclical theory of poverty and provides an exploration of the culture of poverty, and is an examination of the structural theory of poverty, including a discussion of the hidden curriculum.

Cyclical Theory of Poverty

The cyclical theory of poverty is based on the idea that there is a self-sustaining cycle of poverty. Poverty is blamed on circumstances of birth. The poor are born into a disadvantaged minority and inherit the problems of that community. Connell (1993) explained that the cycle includes poor academic performance, leaving school without completion of a program,

followed by the urgent need to obtain employment. But lack of skills and education result in labour market vulnerability and social disempowerment which feeds back into the cycle of personal and community poverty.

Education plays an important role in the cycle of poverty. According to Connell (1993), within the cycle children of poverty have low academic aspirations and poor family financial support, which lead to low educational achievement. This means these children only have access to low paying employment and this guarantees poverty in the next generation. Connell calls the cycle of poverty a "false geography of the problem" (p. 23) because it creates three false perceptions.

The first false perception that the cycle of poverty creates is that educational inequality is a problem about a disadvantaged minority. Connell maintains that this leads to the view that the mainstream or majority of students are all on the same footing. The comparative statistics of students who drop out of school and those who enter university, according to Connell (1991) show there is another minority, the advantaged minority. The majority of the students fall into a middle category, which includes both the advantaged and disadvantaged. This proves, according to Connell (1993) that even though children may "suffer the most severe effects of the larger pattern, they are not outside it" (p. 23).

The second perception is that educational reform is a technical problem. This results in the assertion that the way to correct inequities in education is to find a technical fix. An example of this is in the standardized testing movement. Connell (1993) believes that this assumption creates the illusion that "management expertise could overcome the appalling effects of community poverty" (p. 24).

The third perception is that the "poor are culturally different from the majority" (Connell, 1993, p. 23). This has created a "culture of poverty" thesis which maintains that there are "psychological, attitudinal and cultural distinctiveness" (p. 23) evident between children who grow up in poverty and those who grow up in affluence.

The Culture of Poverty

The culture of poverty is a major theme in poverty and education literature. Waxman (1986) summarized the cultural perspective on poverty as seeing the lower class manifesting patterns of behavior and values that are characteristically different from those of the dominant society. He added that from the cultural perspective, these patterns of behavior and value are "transmitted intergenerationally through socialization and have become the subculture determinants of the lower socioeconomic status of the poor" (p. 7). Leacock (1971) described the culture of poverty as being the degrading cycle of welfare and unemployment which leads to poverty-stricken conditions that are perpetuated from generation to generation. This negative connotation was pointed out by Maynes (1990) as having been firmly rooted in history, because as Waxman (1986) explained, the cultural values and norms of the poor are perceived to be antisocial by the mainstream culture.

Maynes (1990) listed two major tenets of the cultural perspective: that there is a culture of poverty that entraps the poor; and that the values, beliefs, and norms of the poor that they have developed through exposure to that culture of poverty must be changed to those of mainstream society if they are to become productive citizens. Maynes cited Waxman in claiming that this attitude creates a "stigma of poverty" (p. 53) that exists because the socially advantaged, aware of the antisocial behavior of a small minority of

the poor, attribute those qualities to all of the poor. It is this stigma that students in low socioeconomic areas bring to school. Stevens and Wood (1987) argued that children who "grow up in an environment of poverty have severe limitations on their freedom of choice compared to those who grow up in an environment of abundance" (p. 9).

Researchers working from a cultural perspective have drawn a correlation between low levels of education and low socioeconomic background. Connell (1993) stated that the idea of a self-sustaining cycle of poverty led to the belief that children who grew up in poverty had low educational aspirations and achievement. This, Connell contended, was supposed to lead to unemployment and an intra-generational cycle of poverty. Compensatory education was proposed as the solution to end this cycle. Connell explained that the 'compensatory' logic in education was to solve poverty-related problems by adding extra resources to the schools in low socioeconomic areas. However, the reality of compensatory education programs, according to Connell is that "they are embedded in an institutional system. Most of the activity in disadvantaged [low socioeconomic] schools is managed through the usual routines of the school system" (p. 65).

Wilson (1987) stated that the isolation that exists in low socioeconomic areas affects the educational opportunity of the youth who live there. They are not exposed to the role models of employed adults, and therefore are isolated from mainstream society and the opportunities it offers. The cultural perspective on poverty does not take the impact of social isolation into account.

> Culture of poverty implies that basic values and attitudes of the ghetto subculture have been internalized and thereby influence behaviour. Social isolation, on the other hand, not only implies that

> contact between groups of different class and/or racial backgrounds is either lacking or has become increasingly intermittent but that the nature of this contact enhances the effects of living in a highly concentrated poverty area. (p. 61)

Wilson listed some of the constraints and opportunities inherent in the social isolation which living in a low socioeconomic area can bring:

> kinds of ecological niches that the residents of these neighborhoods occupy in terms of access to jobs and job networks, availability of marriageable partners, involvement in quality schools, and exposure to conventional role models. (p. 61)

The cyclical theory of poverty, from which the concept of the culture of poverty has developed, creates the impression that the root of the problem is that poverty is inherited and cannot be avoided. This places the social problems and inequities on the heads of the poor or the "errors of the specific schools serving them" (Connell, 1993, p. 24). Within this understanding the "virtues of the mainstream are taken for granted" (p. 24). Connell suggests that the issue of poverty and education needs to be relocated into an analysis of the system of education. The structural theory of poverty examines those institutions and social structures which maintain the status quo and institutionalize social inequities. The next section provides an examination of the structural theory of poverty.

Structural Theory of Poverty

The structural theory of poverty is based on the hypothesis that poverty is socially produced, not inherited. The unequal distribution of social assets such as income, wealth and power create different interest groups and different fates for the different social groups. The structural theory of poverty according to Connell (1993) is the "production, shaping, legitimating and reproduction of structures of inequality" (p. 27). This analysis of poverty includes an advantage cycle as well as a poverty cycle.

Olson (1995) stated that income distribution and poverty "affect particular groups on the basis of age, family status, gender, region and other variables" (p. 164). Olson argued that the structure of poverty is such that it can be predicted "in contextual situations who will be affected by poverty the most" (p. 164). The unequal distribution of social assets and formation of interest groups leads to the private accumulation of wealth, the legitimating of inequality and into the unequal distribution of social assets (Connell, 1993).

Education plays a significant role in the structural theory of poverty. Connell (1993) relocates the problems surrounding poverty and education in the "conventional subject-matter and texts, traditional teaching methods and assessment" (p. 24) of the institutional nature of schools. The broader characteristics of the educational system such as curriculum and pedagogy, need to be examined as part of the problem. The focus on issues surrounding poverty and education means that "issues previously on the margin look more central" (p. 24). According to Connell, this refocuses concerns on educational issues. The educational issues in the structural theory of poverty become: the institutional shape of the educational system and the selectiveness at its upper levels, the economics of education as an issue of social justice, the exclusion of students through the schools' routines, changes in the social role of education and the social history of the mainstream curriculum and pedagogy.

The first issue, the institutional shape of the educational system and its selectiveness at upper levels, means a "narrowing offer of learning" (Connell, 1993, p. 24) which forces unequal outcomes even if the system promises equal opportunities. The limited number of places in higher levels of education creates a struggle for advantage and political and

economic resources are mobilized. The poor do not traditionally have the advantage of political and economic influence and, therefore, educational policies are likely to reinforce the "advantages of the privileged and confirm the exclusion of the poor" (p. 24).

The second issue, the economics of education as a social justice issue, invites an examination of per capita spending on schools. There are differences and inequities in the physical state of schools, the funding and the resources they receive. Connell (1993) maintained that there are "major differences in the total social investment in the education of rich children and poor children" (p. 25).

The third issue relates to the exclusion of students which occurs through school routine and regulation practices. The workplace or institutional atmosphere of schools can lead to the stereotyping of students and the exclusion of students from programs.

The fourth issue is concerned with the changes in the social role of education and organized knowledge, and the force that education has become in relation to access to the labour market. Education is also a major force in the "producing and codifying" (Connell, 1993, p. 26) of the knowledge that reinforces economic inequality.

Finally, the social history of mainstream curriculum and pedagogy used is a major issue in the reinforcing of the status quo by educational institutions. The mainstream curriculum and pedagogy are socially dominant in the educational system. This has meant that the dominant political forces have allowed the powerful elite to succeed in "marginalising other experiences and other ways of organizing knowledge" (Connell, 1993, p. 25). It is a system that is reinforced by the educational enterprise, even if the workers in the system (teachers and

administrators) are not part of the social elite. The subtle control that reinforces the mainstream curriculum and pedagogy is called the hidden curriculum.

Hidden Curriculum

A critical approach to educational research involves an examination of the curriculum, which McLaren (1989) described as not only a syllabus, but also an induction into a way of life. The hidden curriculum refers to unintended outcomes of the schooling process. Apple (1990) described hidden curriculum as "the tacit teaching of social and economic norms and expectations to students in schools" (p. 44). Hidden curriculum is more than just what is taught and how it is taught; it is a reflection of the social values, attitudes, and expectations that exist in the classroom. A critical analysis of the hidden curriculum discloses the reproduction of the status quo and how this disenfranchises students who are outside the mainstream.

McLaren (1989) claimed that the teaching of middle-class standards is an unintended outcome of the schooling process and labeled this the hidden curriculum. The middle-class status quo that schools perpetuate creates an atmosphere of alienation for students from the lower classes. The circumstances of poverty often make conforming to middle-class standards impossible, so schooling prepares students from low socioeconomic schools for subordinate positions in society. McLaren claimed that poorer students feel alienated from the educational process because schools reinforce the status quo and low socioeconomic groups are outside the status quo.

Education is often touted as a means of social advancement. Jencks (1977) claimed that middle-class families maintain their social privilege by encouraging a high degree of education. Ryan (1972) suggested that

education may be perceived as a means of breaking the cycle of poverty, but children from lower-class families often lack the positive educational influences that exist in middle-class families. The Canadian Teachers' Association stated in a 1989 report, *Children, Schools, and Poverty*, that children from lower-class families may not have a home environment that includes books, intellectual discussions, and parents who value education. Maynes (1990) noted that students from poor backgrounds have different bases of experiences than do students from middle-class backgrounds. Many of these experiences are of such a nature that students might not be comfortable discussing them in a classroom setting. While education may be seen as a means for social advancement, many students from low socioeconomic families do not have the community and parental support that students from middle-class families have.

This section has examined theoretical perspectives on why poverty exists in society and the place of the school in replicating the social structures of society. The next section explores the educational experiences of children who grow up in poverty.

Academic Performance and Poverty

The social class of a child is the strongest determinant in that child's chances for academic success. According to Lutz and Iannaccone (1995):

> A student's social class background is a better predictor of his or her school success and more likely to determine the parents' ability to influence the governance structures that define their child's success than is either their race or ethnicity. (p. 13)

This discussion of the effects of poverty on the education of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds is organized into four sections: "Nature of Low Socioeconomic Communities", "Family Influences", and "Educational Experiences".

Nature of Low Socioeconomic Communities

The nature of low socioeconomic communities has a significant impact on the relationship between poverty and school achievement.

Oishi (1974) found that a large number of students from low socioeconomic areas suffered from social and emotional problems, and lacked sufficient nutrition and adequate clothing. And over one third came from broken homes. There is also a high incidence of families on welfare and twice as many school transfers for low socioeconomic community students as compared to students from high socioeconomic communities. Oishi pointed out that it was not surprising that the social characteristics of low socioeconomic areas had a direct effect on the academic achievement of students from that area.

The voices of the poor are muted by their lack of political power. They do not have strong lobby groups to communicate their needs to politicians, and so the violence and civil unrest in inner cities is blamed on the "poverty of values of the people involved and not on impoverished conditions" (Diver-Stamnes, 1995, p. 4). Diver-Stamnes claimed that the inequities of the socioeconomic system are overshadowed in low socioeconomic communities by the:

> symptoms of the problems, such as unemployed or under employed workers, slum like housing conditions, or people living in abject poverty, rather than the problems themselves, thus obscuring the need to uncover the real causes and poor people then become the problem. (p. 4)

The exogenous social factors of low socioeconomic communities affect the lives of the people who live there and the behaviour of the students who come from there. Schorr and Schorr (1996) asserted that the nature of low socioeconomic communities creates a problem with respect to

role models for the young because the most successful people are drug pushers, pimps and prostitutes. They claim that there are few examples of people:

> whose lives demonstrate that education is meaningful, that steady employment is a viable alternative to welfare and illegal pursuits, and that a stable family is an aspect of normalcy. (p. 117)

Lemann (1986) described inner-city ghettos as "a kind of free fall into social disorganization" wherein "families and communities have no accountability systems at all" (p. 35). He stated that schools in these areas are made up of students who must live in the midst of that chaos and hence become overwhelmed and out of control. He maintained that these low socioeconomic communities have a "self-generating, destructive culture of poverty" (p. 36) and that it is impossible to try to solve the problems of the poor through education or any other method. However, Hullihan (1993) insisted that there can be successful schools in low socioeconomic areas; schools that "refuse to be neutral as to whether or not their students become disciplined, learn to read and count and experience a sense of community" (p. 347). Hullihan claimed that there are successful inner-city schools that overcome the obstacles of poverty. The problem with Hullihan's assertion is that it puts the responsibility for overcoming the disadvantages of poverty on students who are already disadvantaged by poverty. According to Connell (1993), this argument suggests that, "statistically speaking, the best advice we can give to a poor child keen to get ahead through education is to choose richer parents" (p. 22). Jencks (1979) supported this argument by suggesting that:

> based on the empirical data, income redistribution is a more sensible base on which to attack poverty, since empirical data suggested that changing one's income

> also tends to change one's social class, which in turn change one's educational level. (p. 166)

Jencks believed that the most logical strategy to address structural inequality is through income redistribution and not through education.

Family Support

A pattern of low academic performance of students from low socioeconomic areas is well documented. Ryan (1972) stated that the prevalent theme in the literature is that students from poorer families do not learn subject matter as well, receive low academic standings, have a low retention rate, have low educational aspirations, and have low occupational aspirations. Oishi (1974) claimed that students from low socioeconomic areas also participate less in extracurricular and social activities. In an April 18, 1997 "Globe and Mail" article, "The poor fare worst in schools", Alanna Mitchell cited Alan Mirabelli of the Vanier Institute of the Family, "It's no secret why poorer children fare worse in school [than more affluent children]" (p.2). According to Mirabelli:

> the parents in such families [poor] may have to work many more hours -- and at less convenient times -- than the parents in wealthier families. They may not have the skills or the time to read to children, tell them stories or introduce them to music. The poorer children may go to school hungry, be dealing with abusive parents, miss more school because of illness or be getting too little sleep. None of that predisposes them to academic excellence. (p. 2)

Whitehead (1993) wondered how to reconcile our long-standing social belief in equality and diversity with the evidence that not all family structures produce equal outcomes for children. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds have different socializing experiences than do middle-class children and may not be as prepared for the learning processes and behavior expectations of the classroom. The home environment of children from a background of poverty is different from

the one that has molded the school and its educational system (Waxman, 1986). Poverty creates special circumstances in the home and community, and teachers are confronted with the consequences of these circumstances in the classroom. Low achievement of urban-poor students does not necessarily mean that the students have low academic ability. Maynes (1990) pointed out, these students may not learn academic skills because they are worried about survival.

Educational Experiences

The relationship between the student and the teacher is the point at which educational activities occur. It is therefore necessary to examine what happens in the classroom to understand the relationship between poverty and education. Olson (1995) stated that a variety of educational studies have illustrated that:

> schools varied in the way they related to children of different class backgrounds, representing a systematic preference for middle-class values, language, and views of the world. (p. 167)

In looking at the interaction between teacher and student, Jones and Selby (1972) maintained that this is where social influences engage, particularly those influences arising from social class. They made the argument that most teachers are drawn from the middle class and emphasize values such as orderliness, neatness, and respectability. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argued that students are rewarded for different classroom behaviors that correspond to personality traits associated with their social-class backgrounds: the working classes for docility and obedience and the managerial class for initiative and personal assertiveness. Olson (1995) noted that various studies in education have argued that the "systematic preference for middle class language/values of schooling represented a

'code' that was accepted" (p. 167). Because the poor vary in the form of their language they are often less successful in school. Thus, schools which identify some children as successful and others as unsuccessful are according to Olson, not "measuring differences in intelligence or ability, but differences in cultural forms" (p. 167). These studies have also suggested that "the curricular practices of schools actually drove a wedge between values practiced in working-class homes and those of the school" (p. 167). According to McLaren (1986), education for the working-class tends to be "rote learning, drill, and practice" (p. 89).

Ryan (1972) argued that the tendency for teachers to evaluate pupils in terms of the middle-class values from the educational system suggests that there could be discrimination against children from lower-class backgrounds. Even if a teacher does not maintain middle-class values, the profession itself reflects middle-class standards, and lower-class students suffer if these standards are widely shared by teachers. Olson (1995) described studies done on the work process of elementary school teachers that illustrated that the work of teachers was "highly dependent on the implicit assumption that someone else (the mother at home) had already done some type of prior work" (p. 168). When the principals in Maynes' (1990) study discussed student behavior, they observed that many lower-class students lack the basic social skills and middle-class values that are not part of their reality.

The discussion in this section on the academic performance of children who grow up in poverty illustrates that children from low socioeconomic backgrounds receive a different education than those children from a more affluent backgrounds.

Empowerment In Schools

Adams (1991) claimed that empowerment can be defined as "becoming powerful." He further defined it as embodying two dimensions "being given power and taking power" (p. 208). Students can take power in the classroom by refusing to participate, or by being disruptive, but it is administrators and the teacher who decide whether to give students power. Adams gave one example of giving students power, to allow students to complain (p. 208). This entails giving students a voice. Allowing students to complain or voice their opinions requires giving them a formal voice, which is usually done through student councils or other formal organizations. Johnson (1991) suggested that students also have an informal voice of compliant. According to Johnson, student voice is feedback:

> Almost anything students do or say can be considered feedback, from scrawling graffiti on the bathroom walls to writing petitions and voicing concerns at school board meetings. (p. 5)

Adams (1991) explained that empowerment in the classroom can be understood at different levels: "self-empowerment by teachers, empowerment of pupils by teachers, and self-empowerment by pupils" (p. 208). The area of empowerment that he thought was the most applicable to students related to increasing their rights. He suggested that one way to respond to the protests of students is to understand them "as a demand for more rights as pupils" (p. 208). Adams believed that student misbehaviour is a result of their lack of rights:

> It is undeniable that the evidence points to the need for pupils to have more say in the conditions of their schooling. 'Bad behaviour' can be attributed to lack of power. 'Disruption' can be blamed on the need to listen more to pupils. (p. 208)

Adams (1991) believed that students have the right to complain and that their complaints should be heard. He argued that, if students' complaints were listened to, they would not misbehave, and would shift from attempts at empowerment by class disruption to achieving empowerment through the development of a more critical voice. When voice is fully developed, according to Gitlin (1991), it is a "form of political action that is both an articulation of one's critical opinions and a protest" (p. 459). The political action that comes out of voice depends on the social position or influence of the group. Gitlin claimed that the development of voice in the educational context, has implications for "both the roles of those involved in schools and the structure of schooling" (p. 460). The development of voice for those traditionally disenfranchised from schools, according to Gitlin, includes "attaining the right to tell their stories. The telling of these stories allows these groups to enter into policy debates and challenge the authority of others" (p. 460).

Having a voice in the classroom gives students the empowerment of control. Johnson (1991) claimed that when people feel a sense of control "they are less distracted and more motivated to complete the task" (p. 11). The control that voice gives the students in the classroom helps them to develop ownership for their education. Cohen (1986) stated that when students feel ownership in the classroom, they "achieve more, come to school more often, are tardy less often compared to those who do not participate in the decisions which affect them" (p. 259). Allowing students to have ownership and control in the classroom builds an emotional bond of trust between the teacher and the students. Richard and Patricia Schmuck (1991) reported that students knew the types of teachers that they needed. They wanted: "teachers to be human beings who would show trust,

respect and understanding of youth" (p. 90). They argued that these teaching qualities are only possible when there is a high level of communication. Listening to students lessens their alienation and increases their self-confidence.

Summary

A review of the literature on poverty and education shows that there are a number of social reasons why academic achievement for students with low socioeconomic backgrounds is low. The literature suggested that the middle-class elitism that schools perpetuate creates an atmosphere of alienation for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and that empowerment, giving students a voice and a sense of being trusted in the classroom, could begin to help overcome these problems.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

"What ought to be interesting . . . is the unfolding of a lived life rather than the confirmation such a chronicle provides for some theory."
Coles, 1989

Patton (1990) referred to the use of particular ideological and theoretical frameworks when he stated that the "extent to which any particular study is orientational is a matter of degree" (p. 86). Schwandt (1989) explained that:

> Our constructions of the world, our values, and our ideas about how to inquire into those constructions, are mutually self-reinforcing. We conduct inquiry via a particular paradigm because it embodies assumptions about the world that we believe and values that we hold, and because we hold those assumptions and values we conduct inquiry according to the precepts of that paradigm. (p. 399)

The main orientation of this study is toward the explication of theory and ideology revealed in the discourse and action of the participants and in my conversations and interactions with them. This choice of orientation reflects my belief that "people must not be typecast, but discovered" (Perez & Torres-Guzman, 1992).

My conduct in this study was guided by the assumptions of the interpretive paradigm and influenced by an orientation to critical action research methodology.

Interpretive Paradigm

Burrell and Morgan (1979) explained that the interpretive paradigm seeks to elucidate the associated networks of the social reality created by the participants. Interpretive theory, according to Denzin (1988), "describes and probes the intentions, motives, meanings, contexts, situations and circumstances of action" (p. 39). Such an approach

explores the essence of the everyday world including such issues as social order and status quo. The interpretive paradigm provides a means for looking at the nature of the social world. Within that paradigm organizations exist as patterns of human behaviour, experienced and viewed differently by different participants. If organizations exist only in a conceptual sense, then the reasons that society has restrictions and rules must be examined. When looking at concerns relating to poverty and education, it is necessary to acknowledge the disenfranchisement of students. These students from low socioeconomic areas may follow the rules and regulations of an educational system that adheres to the status quo, but what is important is their interpretation of the system. What has to be understood is what lies behind the reproduction of the day-to-day, "normal" state of affairs.

Those whose research is guided by this paradigm seek to explore situations from within the frame of the participants rather than from the perspective of an observer of the action. Such researchers seek to interpret the inner experience of the people who are being studied.

Nature of Naturalistic Inquiry

Maynes (1990) stated that the naturalistic paradigm defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) can be considered synonymous with the interpretive paradigm. Lincoln and Guba argued that "Paradigms are axiomatic systems characterized essentially by their differing sets of assumptions about the phenomena into which they are designed to inquire" (p. 233). They listed five axioms that detail the assumptions of naturalistic inquiry. The following discussion focuses on the manner in which those axioms apply to this study.

Axiom 1: The nature of reality is viewed as multiple, intangible, and holistic.

This axiom relates to the ontology of the naturalist paradigm which holds that generalizations about human characteristics and processes can not be made. Borg and Gall (1989) interpreted this axiom to mean that each subject is different and unique and can only be studied holistically (p. 383). Denzin (1988) stated that the interpretivist attempts "to capture the core of the meaning and contradictions of the human situation" (p. 18). Individuals have independent realities which cannot be predicted or controlled.

I sought to understand the lived realities of schooling from a group of grade six students from a low socioeconomic background.

Axiom 2: The relationship between the inquirer and object of the inquiry is viewed as interrelated.

This axiom asserts the epistemology of the naturalistic paradigm: the influence the researcher and the research subject have on each other is inevitable because they "are inseparably interconnected" (Borg & Gall, 1989, p. 384). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) explained that the interpretivist perceives reality as socially constructed and the researcher interacts with participants to understand their social constructions (p. 110). According to Lincoln (1990), this puts the respondent in the new role of participant in "the analysis and reconstruction of the social world" and "collaborator in both the processes and products of inquiries" (p. 290). This empowers the participant to "determine the direction and focus of participation" (Lincoln, 1990, p. 290).

This axiom guided me to acknowledge that my beliefs and past experiences relating to issues of poverty and social justice influenced the development of this study. Here I should particularly acknowledge that my

beliefs and values influenced relationships between myself and the student participants. The beliefs and values of the students also influenced me and our relationships. Their stories have been constructed between us.

Axiom 3: The nature of truth is viewed as context-bound.

Guba and Lincoln (1985) argued that generalizations about human behaviour "are impossible since phenomena are neither time- nor context-free" (p. 238). Borg and Gall (1989) clarified this axiom by explaining that the aim of naturalistic inquiry is to develop "a body of knowledge that is unique to the individual being studied" (p. 384). This study described and interpreted the educational experiences of participants in a particular setting during a specific period of time.

Guba (1978) suggested that even though the aim of naturalistic inquiry is not to pursue universal laws, "Naturalistic inquiry can establish at least the 'limiting cases' relevant to a given situation" (p. 70). He qualified this statement by explaining that the naturalistic inquirer "should regard each possible generalization only as a working hypothesis, to be tested again in the next encounter and again in the encounter after that" (p. 70). In the final chapters of the study, the discussion and analysis of the findings led to the suggestion of some general working hypotheses, relating to the educational experiences of children growing up in poverty.

Axiom 4: The attribution and explanation of action is viewed as interactive, nonmanipulative, and plausible.

Naturalistic inquiry maintains that reality is constructed in the minds of individuals. Therefore, causality can also be viewed as constructed by the individual. Patton (1990) noted that the individual interpretation of reality and explanation of action, means that which is being studied, "can only be

understood as a complex system that is comprised of complex interdependencies rather than simple cause-effect relationships" (p. 40).

This study was not concerned with identifying cause-effect relationships, but with explicating situations that help to describe the phenomena being studied.

Axiom 5: The nature of the inquiry is viewed as value-bound.

Borg and Gall (1989) explained that naturalistic inquiry asserts that research is value-bound because:

> inquiries are inevitably influenced by the values of the researcher, the choice of theory, the methodology employed, and the values inherent in the context of the inquiry. (p. 385)

Summary

The naturalistic paradigm emerges out of the epistemological assumption that their reality is influenced by the individual's "values, attitudes, beliefs, and the meanings which persons ascribe to their experiences" (Guba and Lincoln, 1982, p. 249). Guba and Lincoln detailed five axioms which undergrid naturalistic inquiry: a) reality is experienced holistically and inquirers must approach participants in a holistic fashion by taking their values, attitudes, and beliefs into account; b) relationships between the researcher and participants inevitably develop and the effects of these relationships, which may be beneficial to the study, must be tracked; c) generalizations and claims of universal truths about human behaviour cannot be made; d) the search for cause-effect relationships in human behaviour is impossible because of the "interactive web of factors, events, processes, and ascribed meanings" (p. 250), seeking connections

among phenomena is more plausible; and e) inquiry is value-bound and it is not possible to make it value free (p. 250).

Methodology

The inquiry was conducted as an interpretive study but, in places, shades towards critical action research design. In this section I examine (1) how this study is positioned in the interprepretive/constructivist paradigm and how this translates into the practical conduct of the study; (2) the elements of critical action research that apply to the study; and (3) the steps followed in the application of the methodology.

Constructivist Paradigm

The labels "interpretive paradigm", "constructivist paradigm", and "naturalist paradigm" are generally used interchangeably. Guba and Lincoln (1994) made this connection when they positioned themselves as researchers committed to constructivism "which we earlier called naturalistic inquiry" (p. 105). The constructivist paradigm suggests there is no one reality; that we each construct our own realities. Within the constructivist paradigm, reality is something that one creates, not something to be discovered. Through this study I was seeking to understand the realities of schooling which the students had constructed. Perhaps it is important to note here that my construction of their stories is based on my interpretation of their stories as they have told them to me. So what is to be found in these pages is my reconstruction of their stories.

Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated that the paradigm position has "important consequences for the practical conduct of inquiry" (p. 112). The following discussion explores some of the practical implications of the constructivist paradigm as identified by Guba and Lincoln.

The aim of inquiry in constructivism is "understanding and reconstruction of the constructions that people (including the inquirer) initially hold, aiming toward consensus but still open to new interpretation" (Guba and Lincoln, 1994, p. 113). Progress occurs when the participants and the researcher develop a greater understanding of the meanings of the individual constructions that they bring to the study. Carr and Kemmis (1986) stated that advocacy and activism are also key concepts related to this aim of inquiry because the researcher is in the role of facilitator and participant. At various times during this study I developed a "sense" of how the students constructed aspects of the reality of their lives and education. The movement toward consensus to which Guba and Lincoln referred occurred when I shared my interpretations of the students' stories with them and they responded.

The constructivist paradigm allows for multiple knowledges which can coexist when "equally competent interpreters disagree and/or depending on social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender factors that differentiate the interpretations" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 113). Revisions to knowledge constructions are continuous and knowledge accumulates as "varying constructions are brought into juxtaposition" (p. 114). Each of the students in this study had an individual understanding of the reality of their education. Even though they agreed on many aspects of their educational experience, they did not always view their situation collectively. Each of the participants was respected as a competent interpreter whose individual construction of reality contributed to a broader understanding of the issues that affected the group. As they did this each student developed a deeper understanding of themselves and the realities of their lives in the school and community.

The role of values in the constructivist paradigm is "ineluctable in creating inquiry outcomes" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 114). Constructivism stresses the impact of the researcher's values on the inquiry to ensure that the constructions of "powerless audiences" received equal consideration with "more powerful audiences" including the researcher (p. 114). In this study, I chose to adopt a stance of seeking to understand the experiences of the participants, rather than direct their actions. The voice of the researcher in constructivism is that of the passionate participant (Lincoln, 1991). The researcher is the tool and can be used to voice and interpret the different realities of the participants. The researcher facilitates the "multivoice of reconstruction of his or her own construction as well as those of all other participants" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 115).

I wanted to do a critical study but I was more concerned with understanding the student perspectives than moving them to action. My first task was to understand the students but as the research began I recognized constraints that left working within the constructivist paradigm but always with a "critical" edge.

Critical Action Research

In designing this study I was strongly influenced by several features of socially critical action research (Tripp, 1990). Five elements of the design relate to this influence. First, the study was carried out by a "mutually supported group" (p. 162) and based on participation. Second, the direction that the group took was internally directed. As the researcher I attempted to direct the group towards a "socially critical consciousness" (Tripp, 1990, p. 162), however, the group decided the project direction. Any sort of "radical action" (p. 162) that was discussed in the group came from the students sharing their stories and not from an action

plan that grew out of increased social awareness. The third aspect of critical action research is that the values, beliefs, lifestyle or the consciousness of the participants may be problematic. In this study, this was dealt with through discussing the values of the group, both individually and in the group context. Fourth, the constraints in this project were critically examined in order to "discover their nature more precisely" (p. 162). Some of the constraints were concrete contextual ones (for example, the physical constraint of needing to hold the group discussions in the school, and during school time). There were also the constraints related to our own personalities and social relationships. The fifth aspect of critical action research is that the outcome of the research should help participants to understand plans of action that they may initiate and present to others. This aspect of critical action research only applies marginally to this study. We did not formulate plans of action to be initiated in the classroom; any strategies that were developed came out of student suggestions for surviving classroom situations.

In his doctoral dissertation, Dennis Sumara (1994) wrote about finding a dwelling place in action research. He described a dwelling place as a place in which an attitude of caring and attention is shared. I elaborated this definition by including trust as one of the attitudes that is developed in a dwelling place. I believe that it is through the establishment of a dwelling place that the action researcher finds a way into the question that she or he wants to understand. If I did not have their trust, I would not have been able to understand how these students from low socioeconomic areas experienced the educational system.

As an interpretive/constructivist researcher with an orientation towards critical action research, I needed to acknowledge that my reason

for being with the group was to conduct my study. I was part of this group so that I could answer my research question. Sumara (1994) said that in action research we create something that was not there before and we make the invisible visible. He claimed that it is the researcher's agenda that is being privileged in action research but, this may not be such a bad thing because it takes away any pretense of the researcher being an equal member of an action research group. Sumara stated that he never pretended to be uninvolved in the group, but he was also a researcher with an interest in personal research. Sumara believed that at one point in action research you have to look at how the research has affected you and how you change in the research. The notion of change in critical action research may begin with a desire for social change but your understanding of the question you asked and the situation you are researching also changes.

Carson (1989) stated that action research should be understood as a way to reflect on "knowledge and social life which lie beneath the problem-in-view" (p. ii). I was interested in researching how students from a low socioeconomic background experience the educational enterprise. This type of research requires a methodology that goes beneath the problem-in-view.

Critical action research requires that enhancing social consciousness be part of this study. At the same time, the ethical constraints in the study meant that I had to allow concerns for social inequities to surface from the students with whom I worked. The project had to be directed internally and I had to trust that the process would allow me to explore my research question. I think that this is where my role as a facilitator/researcher must be carefully examined. I was in a position to

influence the issues that were brought up and the way that they were dealt with. Carson (1989) stated that "an enthusiasm for collaboration can lead to manipulation and injustice" (p. ii), so my challenge was to reflect critically on my own passion for social justice. This reflection was done by recording in my journal my thoughts on what I hoped the group would talk about and then by reflecting on what the group did talk about and the influence I had on the discussions. I was aware of the social justice agenda that I brought into group discussions but, if the group was not interested in a topic, it was not discussed. When I did introduce topics, I told the group why I was interested in talking about the topics. In Chapter IV, "The Group", I comment on my attempts to bring forth my agenda with the group and on their reaction. In the introductory chapter, I have also written about my values pertaining to social justice. This allows the reader to know about the personal convictions I brought this study. It was not possible for me to be a member of this group of students as a peer, therefore it was necessary for me to reflect critically on what my role was in this project. The possibility existed for me to not only control the agenda but to influence what the students said about various topics. This could have been done by only allowing the topics I was interested in to be discussed, and by showing approval of some student comments over others. I was very aware of the influence that I had in this group and for the most part I was conscientious about not asserting that influence. This was not always the case, however. The times when I did attempt to control the group agenda (whether intentional or not), the students replied with silence.

Application of Methodology

The research project involved working with a group of grade 6 students from a school in a low socioeconomic area. I met with them twice a

week for almost three months and discussed the concerns, opinions, and attitudes that they had about their educational experience and the role that the school had in their lives. I also spent some time in their classroom, the school setting and the local community. However, the major focus of the study was to report the issues that were discussed in the group and how the students dealt with the problems and concerns raised. Data were collected through the taped discussions with the students as a group. The students also wrote individual journals, but this was not a popular idea with most of them. Journal writing was optional and, for the most part, the students chose not to use their journals. After two months, we decided as a group to abandon the idea of writing in journals. I did answer the students who wrote in their journals, but they usually chose not to share with the group what they had written in their journals. There were times when the students began the discussions by talking about what they had written in their journals, but this was their decision. This was a marked difference from the pilot study during which the use of journals was an important part of group discussions. These pilot students were anxious to share what they had written with the group. Most of the students in the main research group thought of the journals as extra work, and preferred to just talk about their ideas rather than write them down. Only in the sense that the contents of the journals occasionally became topics for discussion during our group meetings, did the contents of the journals become "data" for the study.

I perceived that this study would occur in stages, with each stage determining what the next stage would be. I developed a tentative plan for the way that I thought this study would unfold. This plan was necessarily vague because it was important that the students' relationship with the

school be revealed to me by the students and not predetermined by my expectations. The vagueness of the plan served the purpose of assuring that I would not impose my views - particularly those that reflect my orientation toward critical action and analysis - on a situation where the participants might not benefit from this sort of analysis. I shared Paul's (1992) view that one of the criteria for judging research that has a critical theory orientation is that "all those involved judge the actions it inspired to be an improvement over the previous situation" (p. 6).

These are the steps that I followed in this study:

1. Meeting with the class as a whole: In order to establish which students were to be my co-researchers, I had an initial meeting with the entire class in April. At this meeting I introduced myself and explained my research. I also gave out permission forms for the students and permission forms in English and Vietnamese, if necessary, for their parents to sign. Both were to be returned to me at the next meeting. At the next meeting I worked with the students who showed interest, and asked them to write their first journal entry telling something about themselves, what they think about doing this research, and their opinions about school.

2. Choosing the Participants: Individual differences among the students resulted in some children being more willing and able to participate in sharing their views. I initially worked with a group of eight students, but by the third meeting there were only seven students. One student moved at the end of May after fifteen meetings, reducing the group to six students. We met once or twice a week over a three-month period. The group meetings were audio taped and some of the students kept journals that I read and to which I responded. I also kept a journal of my personal reflections. My journal was not shared with the students, but I

shared my opinions and concerns with them. I hoped that a relationship of trust was established with these students so that a complete picture of what the students experienced at school would emerge. I did not share the group conversations with the teacher or the principal.

3. Observation of the research group in their classroom: Every time we had group discussions, I spent a few minutes with the students in their classroom. I also visited the classroom once for an hour to observe the students. I believed that this was necessary to give me a greater understanding of the students' educational experience.

4. Supplemental interviews: I interviewed the classroom teacher, the principal, and the community coordinator to help me understand the context of the student experience. The focus remained on the students, but these external sources provided the "social framework" described by Patton (1990) that includes categories such as the physical environment, the social environment, formal and informal interactions, native language and documents.

5. Project closure: It was important to provide the group of students in this study with closure. Possibilities for potential follow-up on the ideas that came out in our group were discussed with the students. I suggested that perhaps the students could talk to the administration, their parents or their teacher about their concerns. I did not make such suggestions only at the end of the project; they were part of our ongoing discussions. The students told me about talking to all three of these parties at different times during the project, but they did not say whether they had followed up on a group idea, or they had taken their own initiative in these matters. The project closure consisted of the students talking about what it was like for

them to be in this group. They also talked about whether or not having group discussions could be helpful for other students.

6. Data analysis: Glesne and Peshkin (1992) described data analysis as "organizing what you have seen, heard, and read so that you can make sense of what you have learned" (p. 127). Early data analysis began with reflections written in a personal journal. I recorded data from group conversations and reflected on those entries. Analysis also occurred when the tapes from the group discussions were transcribed and reflections were recorded in a journal. Data were analyzed on an ongoing basis, occurring simultaneously with data collection, a sort of dialectical process (Okun, Fisk & Brandt, 1983). I used selections from various perspectives in the literature to clarify, critique, and explore perspectives of the participants; at the same time the perspectives of the participants were used to clarify, critique and explore developments in theory and research. The interpretation involved the identification of themes that emerged from the group discussions.

7. Coding the Data: Organizing the students' stories into themes, required "making connections among the stories" and deciding "what was being illuminated" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 132). The organization of the data presented the challenge of establishing themes and explaining the chronological sequence. This was done by establishing a number of categories and then charting them in a chronological fashion. In the presentation and discussion of the findings, references to time are made when applicable. The development of the categories began by reading the transcriptions of the tape recorded group discussions and identifying the topics that were discussed in the group. These topics became the labels for coding the transcripts. Analysis of the coded transcripts led to the

grouping of similar topics into categories. From the twelve categories, major themes were developed.

The nature of this methodology also required an examination of group dynamics and the influence that this had on the group discussions. This was done by charting the group dynamics (including the researcher's role) in a fashion similar to the coding of the topics.

Participants

The school was located in a low socioeconomic area in a large Western Canadian city. Within the school, preference was given to grade six students because I believed that these students would be better able than younger students to articulate their views and experiences and participate in group discussions, not only because of age, but also because this was their last year prior to attending a secondary school.

Selection of the participants was based primarily on preliminary inquiries from which I could gain a sense of the extent to which participants' interests were congruent with the ones that I brought to the study, and from which the students could decide whether they had an interest in the project. All of the grade six students in the grade five/six class were invited to participate initially, but it was explained to the students that I would be working with a group of only five or six students. Individual differences resulted in some children being more willing and able to share their views. There were also some participants who did not receive permission from their parents to participate.

The group that initially showed interest was made up of two boys and six girls. During the first group discussion one of the boys decided he did not want to be in the group and left after the second meeting. One of the

girls moved out of the province at the end of May. The participants are described in Chapter IV "The Group."

Standards of Rigor

The criteria for determining the trustworthiness of any study have importance with respect to "designing, monitoring and judging an inquiry, whether from the perspective of inquirer or monitor" (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p. 246). To enhance the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiry, Guba and Lincoln proposed four alternatives to the "four major traditional criteria" (p. 246) of positivistic inquiry. This study followed the guidelines for enhancing trustworthiness recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1982): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility was enhanced due to the three-month observation period which allowed for prolonged engagement at the site and persistent observation. The use of audio tapes, interviews, and student journals as means of data collection covers having referential materials. Ongoing member checks with the students were attempted, but there were some difficulties which are described below under the heading of "Dependability."

Transferability is facilitated through "thick description" of the community and school (see Chapter IV), in which the school contexts are described in detail. The detailed descriptions of the participants and their experiences provided in Chapter IV also enhance transferability.

Dependability was enhanced through using triangulation within each subject to examine intrasubjective truth value. This involved comparing the data from the audio tapes, student journals, interviews, and my observations recorded in a research journal. An audit trail was kept through the documenting of major decisions about the data in my research

journal. I attempted to conduct member checks by presenting the findings to the students and asking them what they thought. This proved to be not productive because the students were not interested in discussing previous topics. What was talked about during the previous discussion was not usually what the students were interested in talking about in the present discussion. That is, their concerns from a few days ago, were not usually their concerns for that day. Consequently, I decided not to do a member check after the data had been collected and analyzed.

Confirmability was facilitated by practicing reflexivity with the use of a journal in which field notes were kept. This journal served several purposes, one of which was as an audit trail. A review of samples of the findings was done with my advisor to determine if similar conclusions would be reached.

Ethical Considerations

The standards set by the University of Alberta for the protection of human research participants were followed. Participants were informed of the nature of the research. They were informed that they could withdraw at any time without penalty and without losing the guarantee of anonymity.

Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained at all times. Participants' names are not used in this report, nor is the name of the specific school site.

Written consent of the participants and their parents was required before the project began.

Assumptions

The major assumption made in this study is that students from a low socioeconomic background could potentially be empowered to deal better

with their community and school environments. Within that assumption is the researcher's understanding that inequities in the lives of the students exist. There were also the expectations that participants were honest and forthright and that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds could benefit from this research.

Limitations and Delimitations

1. The study was delimited to an examination of the experiences of eight students attending one inner city elementary school.
2. The study was delimited to grade six students in an urban elementary school.
3. The fact that these students may not have been representative of other students in the class was a limitation of this study.
4. A limitation of this study was that the students chosen to participate had to be able and willing to recollect and articulate their school experiences.
5. The "pressures" that kept me working within the interpretive frame was also a limitation.

Summary

Matters related to research design and methodology were discussed in this chapter. My choice of design for this study was based on the tenets of the interpretive paradigm and strongly influenced by elements of critical action research. The methodology developed from this perspective included: data gathering from taped group discussions, limited observation and interviewing and coding the transcripts into themes.

This chapter details the practical application of the interpretist/constructivist paradigm and the constraints on the critical action research design.

The stories of the students' understanding of their educational experiences are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

DESCRIPTION OF FINDINGS

"It is only with the heart that one can see rightly;
what is essential is invisible to the eye."
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince, 1943.

For three months between April and June, I met with a group of seven grade six students. We met twice a week for approximately two hours each time. We talked about their thoughts on education, school, and life. These are their stories.

This chapter is made up of three parts. The first part is a description of the school setting and the students in the study. The second part contains a description of the group process. The third part provides a description of the three major topics from the discussions: family influence, environment and power.

Issues relating to power and change were evident in all aspects of this study. They were evident in the students' relationship with me, in the group dynamics and in the themes that emerged from the group discussions. In the second part of the chapter, "Group Dynamics and the Researcher's Role", I explore the relationships that existed within the group. These relationships include the ones between the students, and their relationship with me. The explanation explores the power negotiations and the dynamics of power that existed in the group.

The third part of this chapter includes the presentation of the themes that emerged from group discussions. Three main themes evolved from group discussions: "Family Influence", "Environment", and "Power." The theme "Family Influence", explores the impact that the students' home lives had on the their understanding of education and their lives. The

theme "Environment," examines the interaction of the various forces that existed within the school's neighborhood. The forces relate to community, finances, location, safety and social attitude. The theme of "Power" focuses on the relationship between the teacher and the students. This includes an examination of the teacher's authority over the students and the survival strategies the students developed to undermine that authority. A number of sub-themes are listed under each of the main themes and the explanation of these are given at the beginning of each section.

Citations from the transcripts of the group discussions are highlighted in the presentation of the findings. Direct quotations are used as a means of illustrating and emphasizing the students' concerns and thoughts. Where possible, the speakers are identified. However, identifying the speaker was not always possible. There were many "group responses" for which the specific speaker could not be identified. These instances will be obvious from the context in which they are presented. Often students finished each others' sentences. This was not done as an interruption, but to build on an idea that a student had introduced. Such occurrences are noted in the presentation of the findings.

The major emphasis in this study was hearing the students' stories. In order for the voices of the students to be heard, the interpretation of the findings does not occur in this chapter. The analysis and interpretation of the group discussions comes in Chapter V: "Discussion of the Findings." I acknowledge that the selection of the parts of the group discussions I chose to write about is an act of interpretation. With that as a caveat, what follows is a description of the students' experiences that is as free as I could make it from my interpretations.

The Setting and the Students

This section begins with a description of the local community around the school and is followed by a description of each of the students in the study.

Local Community of the School - The Setting

The school was situated in a low income area in a Western Canadian urban setting. The first time I went to the school I noticed that it was close to some upscale apartments; it did not look like a low socioeconomic area. However, the students, the teacher and the principal all assured that the area was not as nice as it looked. The principal told me that:

> One end of the neighborhood is yuppies who will pay money for the view. They are at one end with affluence and poverty close by. The community is lovely by day and the underbelly comes out at night. Those apartments all have bars on the windows, when you come here in the middle of the night, the condoms and the needles are everywhere. It's inner city, but it gives a different illusion in the day time. A number of our at-risk kids live in the underbelly and you know that they haven't slept at night because there's been partying. At one o'clock in the morning, it's like daytime. People are in the streets, it's bustling and busy, but that's when all of the action happens. I think they sleep all day, I don't know.

She went on to say that the neighborhood becomes the students' playground:

> Everything becomes their playground, this school becomes their playground, kids are crawling all over this place, they access the roof, they are in the courtyard. This is their playground, and that's why we worked so hard to get an actual playground, because the bottom line is that these kids have nowhere to go. They go down to the river valley. They report that all these derelicts and perverts are in the river valley. There are some guys that are pretty creepy down there. We ask them, 'Why do you go down there?' They tell us, 'We have nowhere else to go.' The whole area becomes their playground, including those big fancy apartments.

The students' teacher told me that this community is:

> a place you don't want to leave your car at night. When you come in, make sure the doors are locked behind you. When the weather turns good the girls [prostitutes] are usually on the street, by the school. They, usually, if you ask them nicely, they leave. There are big parties when the cheques [social assistance] come.

He added that some of the homes had been redecorated:

> So, it's a very interesting mix. You have some people who suddenly move away. They've bought houses somewhere else. Like, many of the Asians, they work hard, they survive here and, bang, they go off to buy a house somewhere else. The others have to stay.

Students in the Group

Besides describing the cultural, family and academic background of each student, my impressions of their personalities and their participation in the group are included. The names used are not the real names of the students. The Asian students used English names and were therefore given English names in the study. The following are descriptions of the students who made up the group:

Joseph was the oldest child of immigrant parents who came from Vietnam, but his mother had Chinese heritage. He had a four year old younger sister whom he occasionally had to look after. His father worked and his mother went to government sponsored English language classes. She also attended employment training classes sponsored by the federal government. Joseph was born in Canada. He had attended the school since Kindergarten except for one year when they moved out of the area. Even though they no longer lived in the area, his parents wanted him to continue going to this school. Sometimes his mother drove him to school, but when she started employment training classes, he had to take two city

buses to school. His parents had also made an arrangement with his teacher. They dropped Joseph off on a street corner that the teacher passed on the way to school, and he drove Joseph the rest of the way. Joseph was eleven years old. He was outspoken and freely shared his opinion and thoughts. Joseph was very animated and displayed a good sense of humour. He could also show a dark side when he talked about his anger. Other students confirmed this when they talked about how Joseph got into fist fights. Joseph was small for his age, and being teased about this was one of the reasons he got into fights. He talked about being afraid to go to junior high school because, "All those kids are so big; they'll beat me up." The other students in the group knew that Joseph was sensitive about his small size and said that he was justified about being angry at those people who teased him. The teacher said that academically, Joseph was one of the best students in the class. He was also the student in charge of the school crossing patrol program.

Lynn was born in Canada, but both her parents came from Vietnam. She was eleven years old. She had attended the school since Kindergarten and lived about five minutes away from the school. She had one sibling, an older sister, who attended a junior high school in the neighborhood. Academically, she was one of the top students in the class. She was good at art and she was also a good athlete. The other students in the group said that she was the fastest student in the class, and could play any sport well. She told me she wanted to be a pediatrician when she grew up because, "I just like kids." When I asked her why she didn't want to be a teacher she told me it was because she was too shy to talk in front of all those students, and that she was too shy to speak in class. This did not seem to be the case when I visited the classroom. On those occasions, she was outgoing and

answered questions. She was also the first person to volunteer to be interviewed. The students in the group indicated that she used to be timid, but had come out of her shell and, "will say what she thinks." Lynn showed confidence when she spoke in the group. She willingly shared her stories and opinions, but she did not dominate group discussions. She occasionally initiated the group discussions and showed mature insight into social issues. She was one of three Asian females in the group, and she was definitely the most outgoing of the three. She usually aligned herself with the other members in the group and not the two other Asian girls.

Louise was born in Canada and both of her parents came from Vietnam. She was eleven years old. She had two siblings, younger sisters in grade one and Kindergarten at the school She had attended the school since Kindergarten as well. Louise did not baby-sit her younger sisters. In fact, she did not do any of the work around her house. Her mother did not allow her to do any of the work. Her parents were quite strict. She was not allowed to go anywhere unless her father was along. She was not even allowed to go out on the balcony in her apartment to play. When her father was home, she was not allowed to make any noise or talk on the phone. She had lived in the school neighborhood, but their house had been vandalized and her family moved to an apartment in another area. She was the quietest member in the group, but in the individual introductory interviews that I conducted with each student, she answered all my questions openly and clearly. She did not, however, give any more information than she thought necessary and in some cases gave only one syllable answers. She did not like to talk in group discussions and when she was 'pushed' to give an answer, she would often just giggle. This response was sometimes irritating to me and the rest of the group. It was

difficult to know if her shyness reflected the part she had chosen to play in this group or if she genuinely felt intimidated by the other students. On one occasion, she arrived five minutes early for our group meeting and the two of us had a nice discussion about school. When the other members of the group arrived, she stopped talking.

Berthe was Caucasian, from a single parent family and had an older sister who went to the junior high school close to this school. Berthe no longer lived in this neighborhood. It took her forty-five minutes to get to school by bus. She had moved from this neighborhood, but wanted to continue to go to this school because her friends went to this school. Berthe had moved quite a lot in her life. By the time she had reached grade six she had been to five different schools located in three different cities. She moved again at the end of May. This time she was going to another province. Berthe was eleven years old. Berthe was a group leader, and would often be the first student to comment on topics. She was outspoken and able to express her ideas articulately. She was also a class leader but was not bossy or pushy with other students. However, in class she would often talk back to the teacher and challenge him, but only when she thought he was being unfair. Even though she would confront the teacher, she was soft-spoken and gentle and she liked to laugh. Although she seemed to have potential, she did not do well academically. The teacher said that she had an attitude problem, but she did not seem disruptive while I was in the class and was cooperative and friendly in the group. She was mature and confident enough to say what she thought. The other students looked up to her and would depend on her to defend them against the teacher. They felt that as long as Berthe was around, the teacher would pick on her and they would be safe.

Michael was Native and had also moved around a lot. The second oldest child, he had two brothers and five sisters. He was twelve years old. All of his younger siblings went to the school. He said that he did not really like being in a big family because "They're all loud. I can't sleep." He had been going to the school since grade four and before that, he said he had been in school "All over the place." Initially, Michael showed interest in being in the group, and I was hoping that he would be able to make the commitment. However, he had a problem fitting in with the group and working with other students. He said that he was anxious to say what he thought, but he was not interested in cooperating with the group. It was difficult for him to be calm enough to have a conversation. In the introductory interview between Michael and myself, he often answered, "I don't know. Who cares?" When I would answer, "Okay, that's fine." he'd change and say, "No, I do care. Okay, I'll answer." He was aggressive with other students and did not even want to sit with them. He came to the first group discussion but, because it began at the beginning of recess, he decided he wanted to go out and play instead. After recess he wanted to rejoin the group, but the students said that he could not keep dropping into the group. He said that was fine and decided not to come back. There would have been some difficulties having Michael in the group, but he would have made a very interesting addition.

Georgina's parents were from Chile and Vietnam and they met in Canada at an English as a Second Language class. They had divorced and she lived with her mother and her older brother who attended junior high school. Georgina was eleven years old. She moved out of the area when her parents were divorced and her father lived in another part of town. She took the city bus to and from school every day. Georgina said in her

introductory interview that she was a little bit nervous about talking in the group discussions because she was shy. Initially she was a little reluctant to speak in the group, and would wait for the others to begin conversations. However, she overcame this shyness and was able to express what she thought. She became willing to share stories or giving her opinion. She was also not shy around the other students in the group, and would tell them what she thought of them, including criticizing them if she thought they weren't participating. She spoke very frankly about her opinions of the teacher. She did not like him because she thought he was unfair and a "bad" teacher. She often complained about the teacher and told a lot of negative stories. There were times when her negative stories became very wearing on me, and I encouraged her to tell me something nice. When I did this, she became silent and did not participate. She demonstrated sulkiness in the classroom and told me that she would often talk back and confront the teacher. Georgina could also be very sweet. She liked to laugh.

Jamie was born in Eritria, but she left as a refugee with her family when she was five. She spent time in a refugee camp in Germany, from Kindergarten to grade three, and then spent a few months in France before moving to Canada three years ago. She had been at this school for three years. She did not speak English very well when she first arrived at the school, and spent some time in English as a Second Language class. She had one sister in grade eight and one brother in grade seven. Her sister went to a junior high school close to Jamie's school, but her brother went to another junior high school because they had moved. Jamie's father drove her to school and she took the city bus home. Jamie was eleven years old. In her introductory interview, she told me that she liked the school

because, "The teachers are really nice and they help you learn and stuff." This was in direct contrast to what she talked about in group discussions. She complained about her teacher, indicating that she thought he was unfair and mean. She told me that she could hardly wait to leave the school and go to junior high school. This may have been because Jamie really opened up during the group discussions, or because the group influenced her opinions. She was outspoken and spoke frankly about classroom incidents. She had a strong sense of fairness and was honest about contradicting other students' negative stories if she thought they were wrong. She told me she would also contradict the teacher if she thought he was wrong. This attitude got her into trouble with the teacher and she felt that at times he picked on her. Other students in the group also felt that the teacher picked on her and unfairly blamed her for disturbances in the classroom. She was an important addition to the group because she always shared her ideas and stories, and often initiated group discussions. She was animated, straight forward and self-confident.

Ann was born in Canada and her parents came from Vietnam. She had one older brother and two older sisters. She was the youngest member of the group and had just turned eleven. She had always attended the school and said she liked it because she had lots of friends there and it was fun. Ann had moved from this neighborhood and took a city bus to get to and from school everyday. Her first language was Vietnamese and she was put into an English as a Second Language class when she first came to school. She became a top student and when I asked her what subjects she did well in she said, "Almost everything. I get 90's and up." Ann was quiet in the group, but she did share her opinions and stories during our group discussions. The students in the group said she was the most mature student

in the class because she "Cares about other people, not just herself." She was the youngest student in the group, but acted very mature and looked like the oldest. She was also very composed and only spoke in the group when she had something she thought was worth saying. She had a gentle but strong manner. If she did not want to talk, she did not let the other students intimidate her into saying something. She could be as quiet as Louise, but she did not let the other students pressure her into doing anything she did not want to do. When the other students complained that she did not talk much she countered with, "I don't have to talk if I don't want to." They did not argue with her. She may not have said very much, but she had the respect of the other students.

Group Dynamics and Researcher's Role

Power and change were evident in our group relationships. As the researcher, I was aware that my motivation for entering this relationship was to gather information for my study. The students were also aware of this and, at first, our group discussions centered on questions that I asked the students. As the students became more comfortable with me, they began to talk only about topics that interested them. This change in our relationship happened very early and grew out of my decision to allow the students to talk about whatever they wanted.

In order for the students to open up and share their thoughts about school, it was important that we build a strong sense of trust in our group. Two factors influenced the establishment of trust: my role as a researcher and group dynamics.

My Role as Researcher

I was an outsider who was asking the students to share their opinions and thoughts with me and with the group. I was also very much

aware that, if the students were uncomfortable with me, they would not be open to sharing their thoughts. It was important to me that the students feel comfortable around me and understand that I was very interested in what they had to say. I also wanted to make sure that I made a good impression on the students. The relationship of the group evolved into one based on trust and cooperation. Some students were more receptive at first than others, but eventually all of the students opened up and felt that they were part of the group. This section is divided into sub-sections headed "First Day," "Initial Interviews," and "Visiting the Classroom."

First Day

My relationship with the group began when I introduced myself to the class on April 10. The teacher called the class to attention and told them my name and said I had something I wanted to talk to them about. I was excited to meet with the class, but I was a little bit apprehensive because I thought I was asking a lot of these grade six students. I explained to the class that I wanted to know how they felt about school and education and to hear their ideas, opinion, and concerns. The first question I was asked was "Can we use any language we want, can we swear?" It was not a question I expected. I responded: "It depends, if you have no other way to express or say what you think, but we'll have to agree and discuss this as a group and then we'll decide." To which a student said: "So, if I say yes and everyone else says no, then we can't swear." My reply was: "Well, let's cross that bridge when we get to it. We don't even know who's in the group yet." The teacher did not respond to the students' comments.

As the introductory meeting with the class continued, I told them that they could say whatever they wanted in the group and I would not discuss it with their teacher or the principal. I also explained that being

part of this group would not affect their marks. One of the more outspoken boys said "We can say what we want. Man, I'm joining." I explained that they could drop out of the project at any time, and that I would have to check with them to see if they wanted to continue in the project. They were told that they would have to sign a letter of permission agreeing to be in this project and a similar letter of permission would have to be signed by their parents. I told them that if there were too many students interested in participating then they would be asked to write a short story (one page) for me about how they feel about school. I would use the story to help choose the participants.

Initial Interviews

The next week, seven students arrived with signed letters of permission. Michael, one of the disruptive boys, said he wanted to do the study, but he didn't have his permission form. I said he could bring it the next day. The teacher told me that there might be some students that I might not want in the study. When I asked "Why not?" he said, "They're problems, well really, just one kid, Michael." The principal, however, said "I think it would be interesting to have this kid in the group." I agreed but the student later decided not to participate.

We met in the library. During the first meeting, Michael decided that he didn't want to sit with the group at the round table. "There's not enough room," he protested. I offered that we could move over so that everyone could sit together. But he persisted, "No, I want to sit here." To which I replied: "Well Michael, if you can't join the group, maybe you shouldn't be part of this project." He then decided to move closer to the table, but still sat outside the group. As I looked at him, he moved closer but was still outside the group. "There's no room" he claimed. I shrugged,

"Okay." While I was interviewing the students individually, the group was asked to write a story about what they thought of school and how they felt about being in this project. Some of the students finished the stories during the interviews, and others brought them back the next day. Michael did not write the story. While the students were writing their individual responses, I interviewed them one at a time in the hope of beginning to find out about their school and life experiences.

During these introductory interviews the students talked about their families. The one feature that all the families had in common was transience. Most of the students came from immigrant families; two students had moved many times and had been to many schools.

My first impressions were that Louise, Ann, Georgina, and Lynn would be shy; Joseph would add life; Jamie and Berthe were somewhat shy, but more confident then the other girls. I also wondered about the impact that Michael would have on the group and whether he would stay.

Visiting the Classroom

At the end of May, after our fifteenth discussion, I talked to the group about visiting their classroom to see what it was like. My desire to spend time in their classroom was based on two factors. The first was the chance to observe the students in their classroom, because I felt that this would provide me with a more enriched picture of their educational experience. The second factor was my wish to validate the stories that they told me about their teacher. I did not consider my need for validation of their stories as an attack on their credibility. Rather, it was important for me to see first hand what the students experienced in their class. The students did not share these views. They responded at first with silence and then with some resentment. They told me that their teacher would change

and be nice to them. When I asked what was wrong with that, one student said, "Well, you won't know what we're really up to. What it's really like." Another student suggested that I hide a tape recorder in the classroom because "You can trust that recorder!"

In spite of the students' lack of enthusiasm, I decided to visit the classroom. After my visit I met with the group and I started our discussion by asking the students if we could talk about what I had seen. I asked the students about talking in class and commented that their teacher seemed to allow this. They told me that this is not always allowed and, "If the teacher catches you then we're in big trouble." My response was to question their credibility: "Come on, I was watching you guys, you were talking!" The student responded to my apparent challenge of their credibility with anger. I think they were hurt. One student started to say "You make it seem like . . ." but he did not finish this thought because I interrupted him to say that I had seen what went on in the classroom. Another student picked up on that and said "It was because you were there and he doesn't let us do that every day."

It is difficult to assess the impact this may have had on my relationship with the group. My visit to the classroom was not something that had been negotiated with the group, it was something I wanted. In the session that followed my classroom visit, we discussed what I had observed. The students were not enthusiastic about this topic, but they were open to discussion. When the discussion on the topic ended, the students did not show any further resentment or anger at my classroom visit. It was forgotten and the comfortable atmosphere of our group discussions resumed.

Group Dynamics

The students worked well as a group; they were cooperative and respectful of each other. Positions of power and influence were negotiated within the group. We decided together what the group rules would be and this is described in the section "Group Rules." The decision as to what we talked about in the group was seldom mine. The students determined most of the topics of the group discussions. This is explained under the heading of "Whose Agenda?". The remaining sections: "Role of Silence," "Trust" and "What It Meant to Be in the Group," explore other aspects of group dynamics.

Group Rules

It was important to me that the entire group decide on the rules we wanted for our group discussions. The negotiations started during our first discussion when one of the students kept leaving the group. I was uneasy about having the student dropping in and out, but I realized that, if the group was comfortable with this arrangement, then I would have to accept this. The students decided that we should "give him one more chance, but that's it!" The other rules we decided on came from our discussion on how we like people to act in groups. I asked the students what rules they wanted for our group and they said: "No swearing or insulting." "No arguing or bossing or pushing around." "No interrupting when people are talking." We also decided to accept that, "You don't have to talk if you don't want to." "But if they have something to say then they should say it." "If you're going to come then [you] should come and stay; if you don't want to come, then don't come back later."

The group rules did not change over the duration of the study and every member was expected to abide by them. My role as researcher at

times put me at odds with the rules. There were some students who did not talk very much and I frequently asked them what they thought.

When the students broke the rules and interrupted someone, they would catch themselves and apologize. This was not something that I had to monitor, the students were very much aware of interrupting. I was also not allowed to interrupt and, when I did, a student stopped me and I had to apologize.

My position as researcher also influenced when the students spoke. A few times students were not in the mood to talk and I would "threaten" them by telling them they could go back to class if they had nothing to say. At the beginning of a group meeting at the end of May, the students were angry with each other, and were not talking. I asked them if they were upset and there was silence. Finally, I said to them, "Well, if you guys don't have anything to talk about, I can go." This initiated conversation, but it was a clear indicator that I had a different status when it came to group rules. I would also let the students know that it was frustrating when they would not talk. They occasionally teased me about not talking, suggesting that they did not take my "threat" of returning to the class very seriously:

> [Me] You guys don't feel like talking today?
> [Joseph] I don't know what to talk about.
> [Me] Tell me what's been going on at school.
> [Georgina] Nothing much.
> [Me] Absolutely nothing? You guys, you know, I really wish there were a way that I could make some of you talk, but I don't know what to do.
> [Various students] You could try to bribe us?
> [Me] Okay, you guys you have to go back to your class because it's pizza time.
> [Various students] Ah, come on. We don't have to go back.

Whose Agenda?

Our group conversations usually began with my asking the students what they wanted to talk about. I had told the group that we would talk about whatever they were interested in, but there were times when the students did not want to talk. During a session at the end of May, the students were tired and not engaging in conversation. When I asked them, "What would you like to talk about today?" there was silence. Finally, one of the students said, "You should come up with ideas." When I asked, "Don't you feel like talking today?" another student responded "I don't know what to talk about." I had to wait until they found something they wanted to talk about.

There were some topics that I was interested in talking about but, if the students did not want to talk about this topic, they did not feel obliged to say anything. When trying to get the students to talk about racism, I described a classroom scenario and asked what their reaction would be.

> [Me] What if the teacher read a story about Chinese girls and said some really bad things?
> [Lynn] I'd get mad . . .
> [Me] But would you do anything?
> [Lynn] I don't know . . .
> [Me] If you didn't think a story said something nice about people who were Chinese or native, would you say something?
> [Lynn] Is this kind of like racism?
> [Me] It is.

During the discussion that followed, one student described an article she had read about people's racist attitudes. She described the various racist acts that people had committed, and the other students commented on the unfairness of the acts. I interrupted their discussion and asked, "Okay, so if there was a story [in the classroom] that you thought belittled a race would you say something?" The response was limited to, "I would, yeah."

The students were beginning to discuss their understanding of racism, but I wanted the discussion to be classroom specific. The students were either unconcerned with this issue, or did not understand what I wanted to talk about. When they continued to discuss racism it was put into the context in which they experienced it: name calling. The structure I, as researcher, had created provided the students with the opportunity to talk about issues that concerned them, in ways that concerned them. I learned that I had limited power to shape the discussions.

One of the difficulties I had with the discussions related to the constant negative comments that the students made about their teacher. The students complained about their teacher during every one of our discussions. Quite often when I asked the students what they wanted to talk about, their first response was to talk about how unhappy they were in class. In one instance, during a mid-June conversation, the students talked about going to the principal to complain about something the teacher had done to a student. After three months of hearing negative stories, I had had enough. I responded: "I want you to tell me something nice that happened this year!" This silenced the students and they had nothing to say. By imposing my agenda on the group, I gave the message that their concerns were not important. The students had taken the initiative to do something about their teacher's unfair treatment. They had talked to the principal and had talked to their parents. Nothing had been done about the situation. They were frustrated and wanted to tell me their story. By refusing to listen to their complaints, I was doing the same thing that the students told me their principal had done: I was shutting them out and taking away their voice. This was another important learning experience for me.

The students also controlled the length of time spent on a topic. In one situation, the conversation became uncomfortable for the students, and they changed the topic. We were talking about what it felt like when they received a free lunch provided by another elementary school in a more affluent area of the city. The students were able to talk about their confusion related to the event, but it became uncomfortable to think about what that situation involved. At one point a student said, "Let's talk about something else" and changed the topic.

Role of Silence

Silence played an important part in our group discussions. It was necessary for me to respect the students' option of silence. One of the girls in the group was very quiet and really never opened up, which in setting the group rules we had agreed was her choice. However, I was always encouraging her to talk and at times I pushed her to say something. After a while the other students tried to get her to talk as well, and her right not to say anything was compromised. When the other students tired of talking, they became aggressive about trying to get her to talk. One student told me to "Stick the microphone in her face, and she'll talk." Another suggested "Plug your ears so she'll talk." Another student chided her and said, "Come on, say something. Use that face of yours." Even though this student did not talk very much, she received a lot of attention from me and the other members of the group, who were constantly trying to get her to talk. It occurred to me that by being silent, she was receiving a lot of attention and this may have been part of her reason for not talking. During my last visit she told the group, "Even though I didn't talk, I still liked listening."

Trust

It was imperative that we trust each other in the group. The students quickly realized that our discussions were private and would not be shared with their teacher. This gave them the confidence to open up and tell me how they felt. They also began to share personal stories with the group. It was just as important for the students to trust each other. In one of our last discussions, one of the students shared a distressing story about her sister's friend who had attempted suicide. Before she began, she had to make sure that we would not tell anyone her story. I responded to her apprehension by reassuring her that she did not have to tell me anything she did not want to, and that she could trust me. Her response surprised me, "So long as nobody in the group tells." I thought her reluctance to tell the story was because she was worried that I would tell other people. This was the first time that a student had told the other students not to say anything outside of the group. I reminded the group that we had decided that we would not talk about our discussions with other people. The other students agreed and the student felt comfortable and confident enough to share her secret.

Comfort Level

The comfort level of the group grew very quickly. Most of the students got over their initial shyness and were very willing to share their thoughts with the group and to have our conversations tape recorded. The students encouraged each other to talk and would often ask me what I thought about different things. I never dominated the conversation, and the students rarely looked to me to decide what to talk about. I began many conversations by asking them what they wanted to talk about. There were times when I wanted to continue previous conversations, but the students would only talk about what interested them, and if they weren't interested

in continuing a previous conversation, then we didn't. This was an indication to me that the students felt very comfortable in the group. They did not feel obliged to do what I asked. I was also very familiar with the students and called them by their nicknames. They, however, did not call me by a nickname. I also used terms of endearment such as, "my little friend Joseph," "my two little angels" and "sweetie pie." I did not do this deliberately and the students did not seem to mind. In fact, it seemed to make us more comfortable with each other. However, it was difficult for me to know how the group felt with my familiarity.

What it Meant to Be in The Group

When we began our conversations, I asked the students what they thought it would be like to be in this group. Most of the students said they thought it would be fun, but they really did not have a sense of what the group would mean to them. I was hoping that the group would be successful. To me, this meant having the group open up and share their thoughts. The students were very willing to share, but being in this group meant more than telling their stories. Towards the end of June I asked the students how it felt to have been in this group. These are some of their responses:

> We get to express our anger and tell it to all you guys.
> Yeah, 'cause we talk about it by ourselves, but it ain't really as good as this.
> It felt good 'cause you're nice to us.
> [It helps because] We could talk about our problems and we don't have to be scared 'cause we're not talking to an adult.

To the last of these comments I responded, "Joseph, I'm an adult." Joseph countered, "Oh, yeah, so I'm still not scared."

On my last day with the group, I brought in pizza. We passed around the tape recorder and the students talked about being part of this group and said good-bye. These are the final comments: "It was neat talking about things like that." "It was fun being in this group and it was fun talking to you about our problems and everything like that." "Cause, like, you could tell your problems to somebody."

Topics

The main topics that emerged from the group discussions centered on issues of power and change. The "power" that affected the students' lives came from their families, their communities, the environment and the school, specifically their teacher. The topics in group discussions came from the students, although I did raise pointed questions about specific topics such as racism and poverty. My analysis of the data that came from these discussions led to the development of three major themes: "Family Influence," "Environment" and "Power". Various sub-themes fall under each of the main themes and are listed in each section.

Family Influence

Family and home life was a major influence on how the students understood society, education and their lives. The expectations they had for education derived from parental influence and their family background. In the section that follows, this theme is explicated under the following headings: "Family Life," "Money Concerns," "Family Secrets," "Educational Expectations," and "Parental Intervention with Teacher."

Family Life

Not all of the students in this group lived in the neighborhood. They had all lived in it at one time, but most students had moved away. The students who had left came back to this school because they knew the other students. The principal told me that the immigrant Asian families who had moved out of the neighborhood left because they had become successful enough to move to a better neighborhood. She explained that, even if they moved out of this neighborhood, the Asian parents wanted their children to stay at this school because they felt safe with such a high population of Asian students. Safety was a major concern for these students. One Asian girl, Louise, was not allowed out of her apartment, not even on the balcony. The other students teased her about it and said "Her mom is weird, she doesn't let her do anything." She agreed that they could only do what her father let them: "Wherever my dad goes we have to go." She explained later that when they lived in the school neighborhood they had lived in a house. The house had been vandalized. This terrified her mother so much that they moved to an apartment. She never allows her children to leave the apartment. Georgina, whose parents were divorced, said that her fifteen year old brother stayed out late and caused a lot of concern to her mother, so her mother was strict with her. Her brother calls his father (who does not live with them) for a ride home and this angers her mother. When we talked about what we had done on the weekend, Berthe, from a single parent family, talked about the parties her mother had, "Was it fun?" I asked her, "No, I had to baby-sit the kids that were there and this one kid was really a brat. His mother lets him do anything."

We talked about the work the students were expected to do at home. Some students had specific chores. Most of the students did not receive an

allowance for working in the home, but their parents did give them money sometimes. Berthe explained, "My mother gets some money from the government and she gives me some." When I asked her to explain what she meant by money from the government Jamie said, "You know, the money the government gives to parents for kids and stuff, the parents can keep it and they can save the money for things they really need like, you know high price shoes or something. They (the government) can help you." Lynn explained that her parents were saving the money from the government for later, for school. Ann told us that she does not accept money for chores because "I don't feel right" because "everyone has work to do." Georgina said that she does not get money for helping her mother but "My dad sends money for child support, and I get some." The type of work the students did at home varied from washing dishes and clothes and tidying up to taking care of younger siblings. Georgina said that she did more work than her older brother because, "he's a teenager and he doesn't want to do chores." Even though Berthe was only eleven years old, she took on the responsibility of caring for her mother. Berthe said that helping at home was only fair because:

> When you were little your mom did things for you now that you're older, like she took care of you when you were sick, so when she's sick you have to care for her. I make her soup. I put her to bed. I cover her up with the blankets because she gets really cold and if she wants to watch something on TV then I put it on for her. If he needs to call the doctor then I call him for her.

Berthe had an older sibling, but she told us that, "She doesn't like to do anything, she just watches TV." Berthe's mother depended on her when she became sick. Joseph helped his mother organize her desk at home and took care of his younger sister because his mother was so tired when she

got home from school. Berthe said that she was also responsible for baby-sitting the three year old daughter of her mother's roommate. She resented this because the little girl was bossy and swore at her. "I'll tell my mother but she says that she swears because her mom swears at her all the time."

Transience was a way of life for these students. All of the students had changed residences at least once. Some students were immigrants and other students had moved around the city and province. Berthe had moved around more than anyone else and ended up moving during our project. She talked about missing her friends here but "I haven't been here that long either." Her mother's roommate was moving to another city with her young daughter "cause she got married and her husband lives in Calgary and he's not allowed to move." With one month left in the school year, Berthe moved to rural British Columbia with her mom, her sister, her mom's boyfriend and her cat. Her mother planned on doing home schooling "Which is okay, but I'll miss being with kids my age."

Money Concerns

The students were very aware of the impact that money had on their home lives. When we talked about what it meant to be successful, getting a good job that made money was a major concern. Joseph showed a frustrated attitude towards money, "Just get rid of money man, it'd be a whole lot easier for people. Like, if they lose a job or something, [then] they don't have to worry so much about paying for stuff, about their houses and stuff like that." When I asked the group if they agreed with Joseph and thought that money was a problem, they all quickly agreed that it definitely was. Joseph took a global approach at first and said it was because the "government spends too much." When I asked him who told him that he said "The news." For most of the students, money concerns were a very

personal family matter. Three of the students have parents who had lost their jobs. Lynn said that money was a problem because "Since the cutbacks, my dad doesn't have a lot of money to pay the bills. He got a second job. He didn't stay there very long. He told me that he used to have, I don't know, a thousand dollars. Now he has hardly any." Georgina, who came from a single parent family, told us that cutbacks had affected her because:

> My mother isn't working anymore, she got fired. It wasn't her fault though, 'cause that lady supervisor said my mom wasn't doing a good job, but she was. It's just that my mom wasn't her friend, that's why. And then they said that and they dismissed her.

Jamie said that money was a problem because:

> My dad doesn't have a job. But he had worked for a construction company, but they don't make as many houses. He has to wait until there's another house to build. And my mom, like, doesn't go to school anymore. Used to go to school, like, they give you money. Now we don't like, have very much money, so . . .

Ann said that her father is also a construction worker and out of work, "My grandpa is a construction worker. And my uncle. And my dad. But they're not working right now. My grandpa wanted a tornado so he can work!" Joseph said that cutbacks were a problem for his dad because, "His boss is firing lots of guys because they need money to do stuff for the company. They're running out of money, so they decided that if they fire a coupla guys, then they keep their company." We talked about what it meant to live with cutbacks. Louise said, "You can't spend a lot of money on junk food or something, like clothes." She went on to say, "My sister gets everything. My parents say 'You have to wait until your sister grows out of

hers' and she gives it to me." When we talked about what made us happy one of the answers given was "money." One student said that she was concerned that her parents would not be able to pay for her braces every month: "I get scared because they can't afford it or something. Like, he [her father] doesn't work all the time. So where's he going to get the money to pay for my braces?"

Family Secrets

During one of our sessions the students talked about how they believed a good teacher would know that there are times when a student acts differently because there were problems at home. Joseph said, "There might be some kids, when a lot's happening at home and they don't take part because they don't know what's happening and they feel strange. Like something happens at home and you feel strange and you don't want to do something." This led to a discussion about how much teachers should know about the home lives of their students. Some students thought that teachers should know if there were problems at home, but others said they should not. Jamie said that "It happens at home, and not at school, so the teacher doesn't have to know." Joseph disagreed, "The teacher can talk to you or something and it can make you feel better." Berthe said that there are some things a teacher could help you with, and the others agreed. We also discussed talking to friends about problems and Lynn said, "I think it would be better because you're talking to people your own age and they might have had something like this happen to them. So they would understand." There were also some family concerns that the students thought should not be talked about in our group, but they did not want to elaborate on what they were.

Educational Expectations

For most students, it was understood that their parents expected them to go on to post-secondary education and to a more successful life. When I asked if their parents wanted them to go to university one of the Vietnamese girls, Lynn, said, "I think they do, but we don't talk about it." Other students said that their parents had told them they wanted them to go to university. One said this was "so I can get a good education," but she was not sure if it meant being able to get a job. Another student said he wanted to go to university but his parents were more concerned about where he was going to junior high school rather than "my career and stuff." Berthe, from a single parent family, said that her mother wanted her to go to university if they could afford it. When we talked about dropping out of school the students said that their parents would be very upset. "My mom would say 'You live in my house, you live by my rules!' and she would kick me out." "My mom would be upset 'cause my dad never finished school. They want me to finish." Georgina said that her older brother in high school was doing very badly and her parents were upset because he was giving up a chance that they did not have but, "At least I'm doing good." When we talked about what the future would hold for students who drop out of school, one student joked, "Would you like fries with that?" Ann said that her mother was a janitor because she did not finish school. Joseph's mother was going back to school for her son. "Yeah. She's like 'If my son can do it, I can do it.' So she went back to school." Georgina said that her mother went back to school to learn more "'Cause I didn't know how to do something [homework], and then she wants to help me but she can't 'cause she doesn't know much."

Michael answered that he did not know if he was going to go to university, but "even if I do I'm not going to do anything, even if I go to school I'm just going to sit down and do nothing, just watch TV and all that." When I asked if he wanted to graduate from high school he changed his mind and said "I don't know, no I ain't gonna just sit there." He did not really have any future ambitions, but said maybe he would like to be a football player.

The students' understanding of what education meant to them seemed to reflect what they said about their parents' beliefs. They believed that school was important because "you want to get a good job. You don't want to work in a fast-food restaurant all your life." The students believed education was important for a better future and to learn new things.

The group talked about their concerns about going to junior high school. When I asked if they were excited about going to junior high school, Joseph said "I'm scared." When I asked "Why?" there were various responses: "I'm scared I might go into the wrong class." "Mm, maybe get lost." "Kids might be mean to you." "We just hope we can make friends on the first day of school." "You'll be like, studying in grade one or something." "It's just like starting kindergarten again."

The extent of parental involvement in their children's education seemed to be limited to their concern that the marks remain high. When the playground at school was being rebuilt, parent volunteers were asked to help, but only Jamie's mother contributed. They explained that their parents were "too busy" or unavailable but they all agreed that if they wanted to use the playground they should be responsible for putting it together.

The parents did not necessarily check their children's homework. Some of the parents could not read English well enough to check the homework. They did ask their children how school was going and what they were doing in school. But they were primarily concerned that the students do well in school.

Parental Intervention with Teacher

Another aspect of parental involvement at school occurred when parents intervened in teacher-student relationships. When I asked the students if they would tell their parents if something really upset them at school they answered that they sometimes would. Some of the students had already talked to their parents about how unfair they thought their teacher was and about some of the things he had done to them. Berthe's mother met with the teacher and confronted him about having called her daughter a dumb sheep.

> I told my mom that Mr. Smith called me [and two other students] dumb sheep and she came in and asked him about that. He said it didn't mean anything and my mom said "So, if I called you a moron and you went and told the principal that, then I could say I didn't really mean that and I wouldn't really be calling you a moron."

Berthe went on to say that, when her mother said that, "He [the teacher] got mad at my mom." In an interview that I had with the teacher, he talked about Berthe's poor attitude in class and blamed it partly on her mother, "Berthe is just negative, but you look at the mother and you can see why. She [her mother] is always so negative when she comes in here."

Of course, if the students believed that they had done something wrong then they would not tell their parents. Jamie said that when she told her mother what happens at school, she questions it:

> Like, every time I come home I'm like, always mad. And I tell mom that he [the teacher] is always bothering me she says "No, Mr. Smith wouldn't do that 'cause he's very nice." So I told my dad, but he's like, he's very nice when my dad is around. So my dad doesn't believe me. I'm not sure 'cause he acts so nice around my dad.

Joseph said that when he told his mother the name that a female teacher had called him, she said, "Oh, she's so nice, she wouldn't do that!" Lynn said that if she told her parents that the teacher had said something to her then they would be concerned because "My mom knows that I don't talk back to teachers, so [if] I tell her, she knows it's something." Georgina said that when she was upset about school she could tell her mother about how she was feeling:

> I always come home and tell her my feelings. She started to laugh and said "You want me to go and talk to him or anything like that?" Like she listens to me . . . she doesn't say "Oh no, that's not true." She doesn't say that. Like, she listens to me.

When I asked if their parents ever told them how to behave at school, Joseph, whose mother did not listen to his complaints about the teacher said, "No, they [his parents] said 'Just please try to learn something!'"

Environment

The environment that the group described is comprised of more than the school's neighborhood. The environment includes the interaction among location, finances, safety and attitude. The environment that these students lived in was dynamic; it was never calm or static. There was an energy level that required the inhabitants of this environment to be constantly on their guard and aware of what was transpiring around them. When I commented on how the high rise buildings looked "pretty nice," the

students immediately informed me that they only had that appearance. Both the teacher and the principal described the buildings and neighborhood as dangerous, especially after dark.

In the section that follows this theme is explored under the following headings: "Safety in the Neighborhood," "Safety in School," "Student Maturity," "Violence," "Racism," and "Poverty."

Safety in the Neighborhood

The students had a very clear understanding of their school community and the surrounding neighborhood. When I asked them to describe the neighborhood that the school is in, the immediate response was "unsafe." The main reason they thought this was because, "There's a lot of bad people." They gave examples of being chased by scary men whom they thought were drunk. Joseph talked about having some teenage boys chase him to steal things like his hockey stick or shoes. Louise talked about how when they lived in this neighborhood they were robbed, so they moved someplace else. Joseph talked about when he lived in an apartment in this neighborhood and the alarm went off and "They [the bad guys] don't care about that. They turn it off and then they find it's a real fire." I commented that when I first came to this neighborhood it looked like there were a lot of nice apartment buildings. The students immediately chimed in "No, they're not." "Wait 'til around 6:00. [There are] drunk [people] and then they swear a lot, but when you call the super, nothing happens. And there's prostitutes around there too." I asked how they knew they were prostitutes and Joseph said "When I looked out the window there was this girl, she was wearing a really short skirt, right? She was just acting like on, like how they do sometimes on television shows." I asked him what a prostitute acts like and he said, "Well, um, she stands on the sidewalk and

tries to see if guys would stop to pick her up. Like, walking, she was pacing."

The female students talked about being harassed by men who would make sexual overtures towards them and followed them when the girls ran away. "All of us girls were in the park on the picnic table and this drunk guy came, right? And, then, like, everywhere we went he followed us. Like, we went over to the other side of the school, he came over there. We went to the gate, he come over there. So we ran all the way to my building." The girls talked about a man who approached Lynn and would not let her pass because he wanted her phone number. They ran past him. The students talked about Lynn looking older than she is and "Men whistle at her. They pass by in cars and beep their horns. So men follow her in cars and ask her things." I asked them, "Like what kind of things?" and they said, "You know, like about sex." They talked about "All kinds of sick people" who gave the young girls a hard time. They told a story about one of their friends from this neighborhood who had a man say he was going to marry her and take her away, "She told her dad and he came out and punched him." When we talked about why these people chase them they said, "I don't know, they say they want to have sex."

Safety in School

The students told the story of a "drunk guy who was walking around and pulling his pants down and bothering this little kid." They told the teacher and "he called the police who took him away." I asked the students if they told their teachers if something happens in the neighborhood, and they said "No", but they did talk among themselves about what they would do if someone grabbed them: "I don't know." "Scream." "I wouldn't scream. I'd try to get away."

The students did say they would tell a teacher if there were strangers in the school who they thought were dangerous. We talked about strangers coming into the school and Joseph told us, "Sometimes strangers come inside, come into the school and like, steal things. Now it's all locked with special keys." There have also been people who come in and harass the students. "One time, some guy, he just came to the school for no reason. And he was like chasing the kids around and stuff." "And he was pulling down his pants." "And then the police came and he was just running around like crazy and he was just bothering all the kids." "He was chasing the kids and everybody was running away." The students said that sometimes strangers come into the school and cause trouble. One student began, "Sometimes we see weird people who are, like" and another student continued, "Drunk and then they come in, and get mad at the secretary." Not all the strangers that come into the school are vagrants, "We saw a police around here 'cause a girl was missing from this area. And he asked us, if, like we had seen this girl." "Oh yeah, I remember that." "And we said, 'No.'"

On another day we talked about how this school is different from schools in other neighborhoods. Joseph said right away, "Well, the vandalism." Other students agreed that it was a problem and gave examples of vandalism: "The curtains getting cut up . . ." "People writing on the walls." "Putting gum on desks and everywhere." The students said that another difference between their school and others is that it is located in a dangerous neighborhood. The students had been told that there are some buildings that they should stay away from. "A policeman came and he was talking to us and he was talking about those buildings, the really bad ones and he said they're going to tear it down, pretty soon, he said. But they

didn't." The students thought that the problems of the neighborhood could be fixed if the dangerous places were removed.

The students blamed strangers for coming into the school and stealing both personal and school property. There was the time that a teacher's wallet was missing and they said that it was probably a stranger. I asked if they knew this for sure, "No, they don't know who did it." "It could have been a stranger in the school, or it could have been a student." There was also a mouse missing from the computer lab and the students agreed that a stranger must have stolen that item as well.

Student Maturity

These students were exposed to the "facts of life" at a very early age. The environment they lived in was not subtle about sexual matters and it surprised me to find out the sexual sophistication and awareness of these students. At eleven years of age they knew what a prostitute looked like and what she does. The students also knew that the prostitutes are "down by the stadium" and could tell me how they knew they are prostitutes, "They walk up to cars and then get in." When the female students talked about the men who chased them, they told me what they wanted, "they wanted to have sex."

There were some situations which made the students feel uncomfortable when it came to talking about sex. Joseph recalled a story about a substitute teacher who talked about sex: "He told us how many times he had to make love for his kids to be born." "Yeah, three times and he had three kids, so he had an operation." When I asked them why he would tell them that Joseph said, "'Cause we were talking about it, you know." The students thought they were old enough to have the teacher talk about sex: "Well, we're in grade 6, so we're old enough." I thought that they acted a

little embarrassed about it. When I asked them if they were embarrassed by it, Jamie said in a very cool manner: "Maybe, but I still like talking about the body."

During one of our group discussions on maturity, the students told me that the "girls in grade five act older then them, and they look older too." I asked them why they thought the grade five female students acted older and they told me: "They think they're so cool and everything." "Yeah, they always have boyfriends and wear make-up." Joseph interrupted and said, "They lie and say they did it with all these boys and everything." I asked them, "What do you mean by 'it'?" The students started laughing and Joseph said, "Oh come on, you know, in the bedroom together." I continued, "These girls in grade five say that they've had sex. Do you believe them?" The students answered, "No." Joseph said, "They just say that to act cool." I asked them, "Do you think it's cool?" They answered, "No!"

The female students had the maturity to understand when they thought a teacher was acting inappropriately. They talked about the teacher flirting with young student teachers, "Like, a student teacher comes in and he always looks at them, looks her up and down." "Like a man, like that." "He's married." "I wonder if his wife knows?" They complained about another male teacher who told them, "When I was little I wanted to be a lifeguard 'cause then I could save lots of girls and look at them." When I asked what their reaction was they said, "We were like 'Eeeewww!'"

During one of our group discussions I asked the students, "What makes someone mature?" Joseph answered that it meant "Doing what you want and not what others try to force you to do." He also said that being mature means being able to take care of money and that was proof that he

was not mature because "I can't do that yet!" When I asked who they thought was the most mature student in our group, they all answered that Ann was and the reasons they gave were: "She takes care of people." "She does all these things." "And she doesn't care who she hangs with, coz she plays with kids in Mrs. Morris's class who have all these problems and stuff like that." Ann was also viewed as mature because she was seen to be responsible and honest: "She doesn't take her Mom's money and she always cleans up her house." "She'll only take the money and use it for her bus pass, she'll never take money for anything." The students said that she was also mature because, "She remembers everything at school, like reports and stuff" which shows that she is organized and dependable.

Another aspect of maturity that the students discussed was their responsibility to help out at school. The students helped out at the canteen by selling things and telling the teacher what supplies were needed. Joseph showed leadership and maturity as the head of the school crossing patrol program, which meant he had to organize the student duties and let the teacher know if someone did not show up.

In my interview with the principal, I was told that serving the community was stressed as a school priority. I talked to the group about the importance of service and asked if they thought it was important to give something back to the community. They did not really respond. I was trying to find out if community service really was important to them. The students did not seem to understand what I meant by community service. Joseph's response to my question about giving something back to the community was: "If you stole it from them, you should give it back."

The students were very aware of behaviour that was not mature. They talked about how Louise would have physical fights with her younger

sister and that this was definitely not mature. They also talked about picking on younger students in the school, and when we talked about whether or not this was mature, Georgina and Jamie said, "It was done to us, so we can do it to them." The students talked about how they were bad when they were younger and then grew up and became better students. Georgina and Jamie indicated, "We used to always do bad stuff and we used to hide. But by grade five we were becoming normal."

Violence

Violence was embedded in the students' descriptions of the school community. The violence that surrounded the students affected their acceptance of violence. For example, when the students talked about students fighting at school, they said that being angry justified fighting. At one point, I asked "Do you think it's a good thing for Joseph to fight?" The response was: "No, but he loses his temper bad, and it's not him. He rarely starts them [fights]. They start it." Joseph often mentioned how angry things made him and what it was like when he lost his temper: "I just wanna punch her [a female student who kept irritating him] right in the face and give her a sock in the head." Jamie told a story about how someone was calling Joseph names and he got mad and "punched him in the face or something. And then he [Joseph] got into trouble, it's not fair!" But when I asked the students whether they thought the school rule of being automatically suspended for three days for fighting was fair, they all said it was. They said that they could even be suspended for watching a fight, or swearing and they also thought that these were good rules. However, when it came to Joseph fighting because he gets angry, they defended him, "He can't help it, he just gets so mad."

When the students talked about what made them angry, they mentioned Margot, a student in their class who had some sort of learning disorder, which they thought was the result of an accident. This student would try to get them into trouble, copy their work, pick fights with them and do whatever she could to get their attention. The student was never disciplined by the teacher because, "There's something wrong with her, or something, so he [the teacher] lets her do what she wants." The students resented this and took out their anger by fighting with her. They told stories about throwing the ball at her: "Georgina hit the ball, and it hit her. Like [it was Margot's fault] she didn't really duck." When I asked about hurting her they said, "Well, she threw snowballs at us." "Yeah, she missed and it hit Ann and she got so mad she took a big one and hit Margot right in the face." The students started laughing at this and Georgina said, "Me and Joseph used to throw snowballs at her every day last winter." When I asked why they couldn't be nicer to her, and if they thought they were being unfair by hurting her, Joseph said, "She's not nice to us." Georgina agreed, "Yeah, she's mean to us." "She's so annoying to us and she always gets us into trouble." I responded by asking the students if they thought that there were some students that were not liked, and if this made it all right to pick on this girl and hurt her; they were silent. Then Joseph said, "I don't know, it's complicated." The students started to laugh and said, "She's always so weird."

There were times when the students were violent towards the teacher as well. The anger that they had towards their teacher was given as the justification for these violent actions. Lynn, one of the calmer students, told me that if something gets her mad, then she becomes negative. The students started to laugh and told a story about how she had

thrown the ball at the teacher once: "We were arguing. We were playing a game. We were mad at him so we started throwing the ball at him." When I asked if they were afraid that they were going to get into trouble, some said "Yes" and others said "no" but, when I asked Lynn if she was afraid, she said, "Yes, but I was angry." There was a violent attitude towards the teacher. I asked the students if they thought they were going to be happier in junior high school they all said "Yes." When I asked why, Joseph said, "'Cause no Mr. Smith." Georgina said, "I hope he dies." This response startled me and it showed on my face. Joseph said "That's not the point . . . it's the kids." Jamie said, "Yeah, who cares if he dies?"

The students talked about violence in the neighborhood and the fear that this caused. Jamie told a story about this girl from another school who slapped her in the face because she thought Jamie was staring at her. Jamie's father got very angry and called the police and yelled at the other girl to get her parents.

> [Georgina] She told her cousin that Jamie was staring at her. She started yelling at Jamie, "Why are you staring at me?"
> [Jamie] And I said, "I was not staring at you. Why should I stare at you?" and then she said, "What's that supposed to mean? Is that supposed to mean that I'm ugly?" And then she wapped me. There were teachers everywhere, but they . . . My dad got really angry and called the cops and was like, "Well, where's your parents? Get your parents here right now! I want to talk to them!"

The violence the students described in their community was part of their concern about its lack of safety. They talked of situations in which they felt physically threatened. At the same time they justified using violence [fighting] themselves as a means of venting their anger.

Racism

Racist attitudes existed blatantly in the environment. The varied ethnic and racial backgrounds that made up this environment led to overt racial tension. The students talked about racist attitudes that they faced in the community and at school, and they also showed their own racist attitudes towards some minorities.

Most of the students in this group came from immigrant families, or were immigrants themselves. Their first language was not English and so they had attended English as a Second Language classes. We talked about how teachers treated students who do not speak English very well. The teachers seemed to expect that these students did not understand anything. Jamie told the story of what happened when she first came to this school:

> I had lived in France [after Germany] for the last couple of months, in a [refugee] camp and my English wasn't that good, and when I was new, I had to go down to the office to call my parents for something. The teacher said in front of the secretary, "Oh, she doesn't even know her phone number." She thought that I didn't hear her because she thought I didn't know English. I was so mad at her.

Some of the students who were born in Canada, did not speak English at home and were placed in E.S.L. classes. Ann explained how the teachers treated her, "They would explain things really slowly and well to me, because they thought, 'She doesn't know English.' They thought I wasn't very smart. I would say things like, um . . . broke the paper." Joseph told a story about a supply teacher who decided to call him by what he thought was his Vietnamese name:

> He's like, are you Vietnamese? I said yes and he said what's you last name and I said Fan and then he started calling me that! He didn't call me Joseph or anything. That's just my last name. Sometimes

> he calls me and I'm not used to being called that and so I don't hear him and then he gets mad at me.

The students talked about their teacher letting the new students, who speak very little English, talk in class. Joseph complained that the teacher would always tell him to be quiet but, "They [the new students] can talk like, in Chinese to Nam about old movies and everything and Mr. Smith doesn't say anything to them."

The students displayed their own racist attitudes towards Natives. According to the students, the people who caused trouble were usually Native. I asked them why they kept talking about Native students and they answered:

> 'Cause they're . . . 'cause their parents, they drink, most of them. They swear and everything. They get it from their parents, same as Michael, and Michael's mom. But he hangs around, like, 16-years-olds and 20-year-olds. Like, and he gets it from them.

I asked the students if they really thought that all Native students were like that or if they thought that some were different. They said that, "They're nice, but, like, just whenever they're not feeling good they're really in a bad mood. The ones that, like, are in gangs or something are bad." The students told stories about different Native students who talked about being sexually active, who belonged to gangs, who smoked and drank and tried to get them to do the same. When we talked about being suspended from school, Joseph said he thought students should also be suspended [besides for fighting and swearing] for "making fun of somebody, for something they have no control over." "Like their race?" I asked. Joseph was talking about physical deformities, and not race: "I don't think you [should get] suspended for race 'cause that doesn't help. They [the

teachers] want to do more. Maybe they should talk to their parents or something."

In another conversation I asked the students about their attitudes towards Native students:

> [Me] You said before that some of these Native kids come from homes where there are problems, right?
> [Students] Yeah . . . yup
> [Me] Well, do they ever say anything about your nationalities?
> [Jamie] They make fun of me.
> [Me] Because you're black?
> [Jamie] Yeah, and Margot will come in and say, "Eeew, Chinese."
> [Georgina] 'Cause she hears other people say it.

Jamie was the only black student in class, and was called racist names by other students, but it was Georgina who told me what she was called: "Mark always calls her nigger." When I asked Jamie what she did when this happens she said,

> I don't do anything. Before we used to tell the teacher. [He'd say] "Oh, don't worry about it. Just ignore it" or something like that, "He's just joking." And then they come back again, do it again. Then [I] go tell and he'd say "Don't worry about it." They do it again and I go tell and they say sometimes, "Stop tattling."

Berthe was the only White student in our group and I asked her if the Native students ever said anything to her, "Yeah, Michael calls me white ball, whitey." She does not say anything to the teacher because that particular student is always harassing other students and they try to avoid him.

I asked the group if they would complain to the teacher if there were stories in their books that said negative things about people. "Like what kind of things?" "Well, if they didn't say very nice things about people who are Chinese or Native." Lynn asked me, "Is this kind of like racism?"

and when I explained it was she told us about a story on racism that she had read about in a magazine:

> I was reading this magazine and this woman said that Black people are God's mistakes, it's just kind of the same thing. It was this teen magazine that was doing this story. And about people who were racist and there was this girl who was in it. And she spray-painted her car with it, with that hate sign.

I told the students that the reason I was asking them about racist material was because I wanted to know if it would make them angry if it was used in class, and if they would say something to the teacher. The students said that they would be upset, "Yeah." "Yup." "If it was like, talking about a Chinese person or something and they say, well, 'Chink' or something like that, I [would] get really mad."

The discussion turned to racist attitudes that the students are exposed to at home. Lynn told us about what happened when Jamie went to her house to visit.

> My aunt's racist. When Jamie came to my house and then left she [my aunt] said that black people stink. And she said if you smell something stinky then you know it's them.

Lynn had already told Jamie about what her aunt had said. Jamie's response to the group about Lynn's story was:

> What would make them smell? They just have different coloured skin. It's not like they jumped into oil or anything. I could smell different or you could smell different. Just, she's just used to you. She's not used to other people.

When I asked Lynn how she felt when her aunt said that, she responded:

I was mad at her.
[Jamie] I feel mad.
[Georgina] My mom's friend said that same thing before. I didn't say anything 'cause . . .
[Jamie] 'Cause around us there's lots of different people. There's Canadians, there's Polish or Russians, I don't know, Chinese and Vietnamese and all that. So [I don't] really care.
[Berthe] Last time I was at Lynn's house, and her mom's friends were over. And they were making fun of something. But they were talking in Vietnamese, I think they were talking about Jamie.
[Georgina] You should just tell [their] parents, you should just say, "Well, pretend that you were black and see how you'd feel if people made fun of you!"

The students talked about what it felt like when people called them racist names: "I get mad. Or sometimes I just walk away." "I just go [leave]." "Sometimes I cry." Georgina is a mix of Vietnamese and Chilean. She talked about the type of reaction that this sometimes causes:

I've heard about it somewhere that on some registration forms sometimes they ask you what kind of nationality you are, Chinese and Indian and there's Spanish and stuff and sometimes they have an "Other" box where you can check "Other" if you're not any one of those. And there was this kid, he was biracial or something. So he didn't want to fill in ["Other"], he didn't like that 'cause it made him feel like he was left out. He went to the mayor about it and the whole town changed and they had a multiracial or biracial box.

Joseph told us that he was also a mix of Chinese and Vietnamese. But Joseph told me, "I'm not a real Chinese." When I asked "Why not?" he said, "I don't speak it, so I'm not really Chinese."

I asked the group if they called other people racist names and they said "No". They did not consider their attitudes towards Natives as being racist, but realistic. I then asked them what they thought racism is and the various responses were: "Hating people." "Hating people because of their colour." "Or culture." Lynn said that it could be the culture more than

colour, "I just don't like it when the Americans make fun of Canadians on TV shows."

Poverty

The word poverty was not openly used in our group discussions, but concerns about parental unemployment, lack of money and resources were discussed. The students seemed to be aware that they were in a school and community that did not have a lot of money, but they did not use the word poverty. I was careful to avoid letting the students know that I thought they came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. I was interested in knowing how they understood their lives, and if they did not think they were poor I did not think I had the right to tell them they were. I did not want my middle class views imposed on their understanding of their social status. The second reason was my concern for the students' feelings. They were beginning to understand that there were differences in social groups and they were part of the group that received less. This was a painful realization for them, and it was not my intent to cause them pain. I was very interested in their understanding of poverty, however, and would subtly raise issues related to poverty.

In a conversation we were having on the conditions of the school neighborhood, the students talked about how their school is different from schools with more money. I asked the students if there was anything that they did not have in the school that they would like. Their responses all concerned greater resources: more colour computers, more music programs, new library books, and a bigger school building. I asked the students about the snacks/food programs in the school. The students seemed to think that the food given to them came from the school and from the local grocery store as a promotion. Joseph's theory was that they [the

local grocery store] donated bread for the school's breakfast program so the students would tell their parents to shop there. I asked why they had to have a breakfast program at the school: "We sometimes have to leave [home] early." "Well, some kids don't eat breakfast or something." "Cause their parents leave and . . ." "Yeah. And then they come to the school and have to eat breakfast." "Or [if they come late to school or they have to leave early] can't eat breakfast, they just eat at school." The students had to bring their own lunches but those students who forgot their lunch or did not bring one, would "go to the staff room to get some food." We talked about students who did not get fed at home: "There are some [students] who're always hungry." The group told me that these students were able to get food at school. The group thought that these students did not have food "because they didn't like the food at home. They throw out their lunches."

When I asked the students if they thought that other schools provide food for students they said, "No, 'cause some schools want to save their money for other things. Like more technology and stuff." Joseph talked about one school having more computers and fewer students, which he said made it a rich school. I asked the students what they thought made a school rich. The immediate response was "money." They figured that the money came from the rich school which earned it by "ripping off those kids" by having dances and charging the students admission.

I asked the group what happened when a student at this school could not pay for something at school. They told me a story about Kevin, a student who did not have any money to pay for his school picture so the teacher bought it for him: "He gets, like $50 for his allowance and goes to Mac's and buys junk food." "He got all this money all of a sudden for some reason." "His mother took off. She was drinking or something." There was

nobody at home to feed or take care of him. Kevin was causing a lot of trouble at school. "Before he seemed so nice, in Grade 5. He's going berserk now, he's going berserk now 'cause his mom is gone. He's just fooling around. I think it's just because she took off without saying where she was going or even saying good-bye." "He couldn't pay for his class pictures, so the teacher paid for them."

While I was in the school I noticed that there were a lot of volunteers helping out at the school. The principal told me the volunteers were some parents who were not employed and would do the food preparation. There were also various church organizations who set up before and after school programs for the students. And there were workers from social services. The principal did not go into detail about the work the social services people did at the school, but she said they were there to help with the family problems of some students. There were also university students who volunteered to gain work experience. I talked to some of the education students from the university who told me they "volunteered to help kids from an inner city school." They helped with extra academic tutoring. There were also university students from the school of social work who were doing research as well as helping. I asked the students in the group who they thought all these volunteers were: "They're from some sort of society and they're social workers or something." I asked them what they thought about having them in the school: "It's okay." "I like doing [the program] after school." "Yeah, Dave's nice." The students thought that most schools had social workers that came in and helped students.

During one of our talks I asked the students what made them happy. Joseph answered, "Money!" The other students agreed and said that: "Money makes you feel great." "You buy stuff. You feel so good with it." In

June the students talked about planning their year end trip and complained that they wanted a better trip. They said that if they were planning grade six themselves they would have better field trips and "We'd use the money that we earned in the bottle drive." Jamie protested, "But it's too expensive, everywhere we go we have to pay so much." Georgina agreed, "Yeah, and we have to pay and not them [the school]. There's no money."

After a group discussion in June, the teacher asked me to bring the students to the gymnasium for a "hot lunch." Before we finished our discussion, I asked the students where the lunch was coming from and they said they didn't know, they thought the school was paying for it. We walked into the gym and the group was in a very good mood, we were laughing and having fun. The students were told to take their seats with the rest of the class. I looked around and saw that the hot lunch was being paid for by a grade six class from a school in a middle class neighborhood. The students who paid for the lunch sat on the stage and watched the others eat. The principal was also on the stage and was instructing the students class by class to thank the grade six class for buying their lunch. When it came time for the grade six students in our group to thank their benefactors, they did not say anything. Their faces told the story, they were crestfallen. They had figured out who paid for the lunches: students their own age from a wealthier part of the city.

In our next group discussion, I asked the students what they thought about the hot lunch:

> Strange.
> Why did they do it?
> Probably because we don't have much money.
> Yes we do . . .
> They raise all this money to buy lunch for us.
> Yeah. Why didn't they buy lunch for their school?
> Why did they buy lunch for our school?

I asked them, "What did they [the grade six class] do while you were eating lunch?" They answered, "Walking around the gym, pretending to play basketball." "They were standing up and eating their lunch." I asked, "Why do you think they did that for you?"

> I don't know.
> Maybe Mrs. Jones [principal] came and talked [to them] 'cause she lives near that school.
> Maybe her son goes there.
> Why would Mrs. Jones ask another school to give us a free lunch?

Finally Joseph said, "Let's talk about something else."

Power

Power played a central role in the relationship between the teacher and the students. In any social environment, power relations are continually negotiated, and the classroom is no exception. The teacher's role gave him a form of traditional authority over of the students, but the students found ways to undermine his authority and thus also exercised power over him. In this section I discuss what the students believed was the teacher's abuse of power and the survival strategies that the students developed to fight this abuse. This theme is developed under the following headings: "Teacher's Power Over Students," "Student Survival Strategies," "Peer Support," "Good Teaching," and "Discipline."

Teacher's Power Over Students

The teacher was one of the main topics of our group discussions. The students' relationship with the teacher was tense, and they often expressed anger, fear and frustration over the way he treated them. They did not find it possible to talk about their experiences in school without talking about their unhappiness in the classroom. They did not like their teacher and

told many stories about what he did that upset them. They spoke of what they perceived to be unfairness, and harassment.

In one of our early group discussions we talked about what the students liked and disliked about school. One of the quieter girls wrote in her journal [and told the group] that she didn't like it when the teacher yelled at her. The students talked about how humiliating it was: "Everyone is just staring at you and you're just standing up there." "You get so embarrassed." The students told me that this happened to everyone in the class, but the teacher picked on some students more than others. The teacher told me during an interview that he considered Berthe to be the most outspoken student in class. The students told me that she got blamed for more things than the other students. "Like, Berthe, is doing her work and he's talking and um, he goes, 'Berthe are you listening?' and she goes, 'Yes.'" Berthe added, "When we are at our desks and other people are talking, I'm the one who gets into trouble for it and nobody else." Georgina said that the teacher told the class that Berthe had an "attitude problem, do you remember that you had to come in and get your report?" Berthe responded, "Yeah, um, after school, when everyone was gone and I was waiting for my mom, it was before we got our report cards and he told me I had a really bad report card because I have an attitude problem. I told my mom and she told me that teachers aren't supposed to be saying things like that to children and if he says something like that again, then she'll call the school." At another time, the students talked about the teacher unfairly blaming Berthe for talking when it was other students who were talking. Jamie said it was because, "He [the teacher] really don't like Berthe." Berthe agreed, "He hates me."

I asked the students if they thought that there were some students that the teachers picked on and they said, "Yes, the ones that have an attitude, sort of" and "the ones that he thinks are shy and don't want to do things. The ones that he calls wimps." I asked them why the teacher would call them wimps. They offered various answers: "He's always putting us down." "And then when you cry or something." Another student continued, "And he goes to your friends, 'What's the matter with her?'" "Yeah, what's her problem?" "He says, 'Don't be a cry baby'." "And if your friends try to cheer you up he says, 'Don't talk to them!' Then you have to cheer up by yourself. It's like he wants them to be hurt really badly or something."

I asked the students how they think teachers decide who to pick on. Berthe gave this answer: "I was told that when kids do one thing wrong and then adults have a whole different attitude towards them. He [my uncle] said that sometimes you might say the wrong thing and the teacher might take it the wrong way and umm, he said that he'll think you're a snob or brat or something." The students thought that the teacher was nicer to the quieter students. One gave this example: "Because she [Louise] is quiet, then she doesn't get into trouble." Jamie said that if the teacher yelled at her and she didn't say anything, then he got angry: "If he yells at me and I ignore him I get into trouble. If I talk back, I get into trouble. So what can I do? It doesn't make any difference."

In a conversation about having negative attitudes, the students said that if the teacher was negative, then they were negative "And then we get in trouble!" I challenged the students about blaming the teacher for their negative attitude, "Oh come on, just because the teacher is negative, you're negative." Joseph insisted it was true and talked about feeling intimidated

by the teacher's negative attitude: "Like, sometimes I don't even want to go in the classroom 'cause I know something's going to happen." The group thought that the teacher's harassment or bullying was evident in his name calling. They told a story about the teacher calling them "dumb sheep" and when they complained to the principal, the teacher denied having said it. Another name-calling story that the group told me related to the teacher becoming frustrated over an incident in the playground and calling the entire class thick-headed:

> [Georgina] Lynn accidentally got Steven suspended.
> [Lynn] 'Cause he swore at me. But then I didn't really care 'cause he always swears. And then Steven got suspended. And later Mr. Smith gave us all a lecture about when somebody calls, when somebody swears at you, you should tell, like, right away. But Steven just said it before Mr. Smith came.
> [Georgina] That's when he called us thick-headed people.

I told the group that I found it surprising that the entire class got into trouble because one student swore and I asked them how they felt about that. They replied: "I don't care." "The thick-headed part, I wasn't really listening." "He always calls people names." Georgina said, "He calls us names but we're not allowed to call other people names." Jamie said, "Yeah, we were carrying stuff in the gym and he [the teacher] told us he was about to say to Michael, "Well, we need people with more brawn than brain." And he was laughing about it and saying it was a funny joke, but we didn't laugh at it. He thought it was funny."

Berthe left at the end of May, and after she had gone I asked the group if they missed her. They all said that they did. I asked them if they thought their teacher missed her and they told me a very sad story, "No, he doesn't like her. 'Cause usually whenever someone's leaving he does

something for them. He didn't do nothing for Berthe. He didn't even say good-bye." "When Tan left he gave [her] a going away party, but Berthe was here a lot longer." "When Berthe left she said, 'Good-bye everyone. Good-bye Mr. Smith.' But he didn't say anything."

The students talked about the teacher's unequal treatment of students. During one of our conversations Jamie turned to Joseph and asked "Did you tell Mr. Smith that you're taking your math home?" He replied: "No, I don't take it home." She continued: "What a liar! I told him that I did twenty-five pages and he said, 'Oh really, well some people got 60 pages done, like Joseph.' I said, 'No he isn't, he's on page twenty something.' And he said you were going to take it home." The teacher told me that he thought Joseph was the best student in the class (academically) and the other students were aware of the teacher's attitude. Jamie was angry that even though she worked hard it still was not good enough for the teacher. The students knew that there some students with whom the teacher would always find fault. The students felt that once Berthe moved away, Jamie took her place as the student the teacher picked on. I had seen Jamie get into trouble that day and I asked her what happened. She reported that a gum wrapper had fallen on the floor and Mr. Smith told one student to pick it up. He refused and then Mr. Smith told Jamie to pick it up. When she said it wasn't her wrapper he said, "I told all of you to pick it up, how did it get there?" Jamie said, "I looked everywhere on the floor and I couldn't see it anywhere. So, why did he yell at me?"

The students thought the teacher had favorite students, favorite classes and favorite years. Their class did not fall into any of those categories. When they asked their teacher why he let his grade six class from last year have longer gym time, he said, "They deserved it, they

worked harder than you." When the grade sixes were planning their year end trip, their teacher decided that the grade five students would go with them. This upset the grade six students. They thought that because this was their last year in the school, they should be able to go on their field trip alone. When I asked them why the grade five students were going Joseph said, "He [the teacher] says the grade five's get to go with us because they deserve it because some of them won't be here next year. But we won't be either."

The group said that the teacher would just yell at some students for no reason or because he is forgetful. Georgina and Jamie told a story about Jamie getting yelled at because Mr. Smith forgot the instructions that he had given the class. "He yelled at me, 'Jamie turn around! Do your work! I've asked you many times to do your work and you keep on talking. Now turn around!' Georgina said [to the teacher], 'But you told me to tell her when it was her turn on the computer' and he said, 'Oh, okay [Jamie], then go!'" I asked Jamie how she felt about that and she said, "Well, one minute he gets mad and he's so old, he forgets it. Then he's nice to me." Other students agreed that the teacher yelled at them because he had forgotten to tell them something. Lynn explained that "Sometimes he'll tell us what to do and he'll forget something and he'll get mad at us for not doing it because he only told one person and he forgot."

In another conversation I asked the students if they were ever nice to their teacher. "Yeah. We were saying 'We should be nice to Mr. Smith because it's almost the end of the year.' But Mr. Smith said 'What are you guys up to? Why are you guys so nice?' So, you know, what difference does it make?"

Student Survival Strategies

When the students talked about their experiences in the classroom they displayed a lot of anger. Very soon into our group discussions, the students opened up about their perceptions of what happened in the classroom. They began talking about the ways in which they fought back and tried to undermine the teacher's authority. The main strategy that they used to survive what they perceived to be their teacher's unfairness, was "talking back" to him. Most of the students said that they talked back, but some were more aggressive than others. Berthe said that if she is unfairly accused of something and the teacher yells at her, then she tries to embarrass him: "Like today, I was working and I had to look something up in the dictionary and Mr. Smith said to me, 'Berthe, are you planning on doing any work today?' And I told him, 'Yeah, I just finished looking something up in the dictionary, but that's probably something you don't do!'" Another "talking back" strategy was to challenge the teacher's actions. Jamie described this strategy: "We said, 'Why are you so unfair, they talk all the time and you yell at us?' and he said, 'How are you supposed to listen if you talk?' and we said, 'What about them?' and he started yelling at us." Jamie told another story about questioning the teacher about why he blames students, "He turned away and Georgina [asked] 'Why do you yell at people if you don't even know who did it?'" Georgina continued: "And he [the teacher] said, 'I don't like the way you're talking to me.' and then Jamie said, 'I don't like the way you're talking to me.' and I was like, 'Then don't talk to us like that. Don't yell like that at us too or we won't give an answer.'"

In another conversation about talking back to the teacher, some of the shyer group members explained that they were afraid to talk back to

the teacher because they didn't want to get into trouble. Georgina said that at one time Ann was too frightened to talk back to the teacher: "She was always, like, so good. You remember, you never said anything, like when he [the teacher] yelled at you or something." Jamie continued, "She never used to talk back to him. And then we told her 'Talk back to him. Tell him that you didn't do it or something.' She said, 'No, I'm scared.' She thinks she might get into trouble. But why should she get in trouble for just saying that she didn't do it?" Jamie said that she keeps talking back to the teacher until he doesn't know what to say. Georgina explained that "She [Jamie] gets him stuck. Like, she asks him a question and he can't answer it 'cause if he does answer it she'll say this and if he answers it the other way then she says something else." I asked Louise, a very quiet and shyer student, what she does if Mr. Smith yells at her. Louise did not answer. The other students answered for her: "If he [the teacher] yells at her she just looks at her book and ignores him, she just reads." I asked Louise if she did this, and she nodded yes. I asked Jamie if she had ever considered just ignoring Mr. Smith when he yelled at her and she said, "No, if I don't answer back he says, 'Give me an answer! And if I do talk back he says like, 'Don't talk back to me!' So what am I supposed to do?"

I asked the students if there was anything that they could do when a teacher picked on them. They offered that "You can say stop." or "You can talk to the counselor about the teacher." We talked about how their parents would react if they found out that they had talked back to the teacher. The students seemed to agree: "Like, if you didn't do anything wrong and the teacher just starts yelling at you for no reason at all, then it wouldn't be bad." "If I didn't do anything wrong, she wouldn't care. But if I did, then she would." Lynn said that she had never been in trouble with a teacher

before. I asked what she thought her mother's reaction would be if she found out she talked back to the teacher. "Well, she knows that I don't, like, talk back to a teacher. Like, he [Mr. Smith] is the only person that I really talk back to."

I asked the students if they should ever question a teacher. They answered, "Yes. All the time." The students felt that if the teacher asked them to do something that they did not want to do [like getting a cup of coffee, putting something in his car, bringing something to the office or staff room], then they should question why they have to do that. They also said that if they were studying something that they thought "No one would need," then they have asked why they "have to learn this." "We have to do news [current affairs] and he [the teacher] says, 'You have to watch the news.' We don't like watching news. We watch shows and stuff." I asked the students if they would say something to the teacher if they disagreed with something in the textbooks. Berthe said, "Yes. Like, today we were reading a story about horses and how long they live. My aunt has a farm and I know pretty much about horses and he [the teacher] said that horses can only live up to 20 years and they can live up to 40 years." Jamie said, "No, but it said it in the book. The book says it." I asked Jamie, "So, if it says it in the book, you think it's true?" Her answer was, "Well, they wouldn't print something if . . . it ain't true."

The students said that there were times when they did not want to ask the teacher questions. The students talked about why Margot bothered them for the answers rather than asking the teacher, "She doesn't know how to do the work and she's afraid to ask Mr. Smith and he won't let her talk." The other students said that they didn't like to ask the teacher for help because, "We're afraid of him." Jamie said that she did not ask the

teacher for help, even if he asked her if she needs help: "I ask my friends." In another conversation, I asked the students how they work best in class. They said that it helped them to be able to talk to each other. Lynn explained, "We talk because sometimes we're stuck and we don't know what to do and then we're scared to ask Mr. Smith, so we just talk [to each other]." Joseph said that the teacher would answer some questions, but he got upset at answering other questions. "He makes a big deal out of just this little question. He gets all mad at us because we don't know it."

The students said that they would not challenge a teacher about doing school work unless they were doing group work and someone in the group was not working. Other than that, students said, "I would do the work that the teacher tells me to do."

Another survival strategy that the students had was to blame the teacher for everything and to refuse to take responsibility for their own behaviour. I asked the students about something I had overheard their teacher say: "That you were screaming really loudly." They denied that anything had happened and said, "He always does that. He says that somebody does something but they don't do it." Then one student seemed to remember, "Oh, probably when we were playing volleyball, everybody was screaming." "Yeah, we were yelling at each other." When they confirmed that they had been screaming, they justified their behaviour by saying, "Well, 'cause we wanted to change sides." If I questioned whether they ever did anything bad which might explain why the teacher got angry at them, they became upset that I would question them: "You make it seem like you don't believe us. You're asking us [questions] and then you, you know . . . ." The students did tell stories of how they had misbehaved, but insisted that it was the teacher who was being unfair in his reaction to their behaviour.

Peer Support

The students gave each other support; this was one of their strongest survival strategies. When we talked about how students and friends can help you, the students said that if you're really upset about something it would be a good idea to talk to friends. "I think it would be better because you're talking to people your own age and they might have had something like this happen to them. So then they would understand." They had compassion for their fellow students whom they thought were being picked on by the teacher and would often defend the student to the teacher. When Jamie told a story about the teacher yelling at her because of her black shoe making marks, she included that "Berthe was defending me, saying that the mark didn't have to be mine, it could be anyone who come in." When the teacher got angry and grabbed Jamie's foot and scraped it on the floor to show it was her shoe, Berthe told the teacher that he was wrong. Georgina continued the story: "He [the teacher] said, 'Okay, fine, if you don't like the way I'm teaching the class, why don't you just tell the principal.' Then Berthe said, 'Okay, fine I will.' and then she went to the principal." Lynn intervened at this point, "Mrs. Jones [the principal] said he is old and everything." The students agreed that Berthe is the one who always helped them when she thought they were being picked on: "She defends everybody." At another time Jamie talked about a supply teacher who got angry with her because she was caught laughing. The teacher decided that everyone could go to the library except her. Jamie protested to the teacher: "'Why can't I go?' and she [the teacher] said, 'You know what you did. Quit acting.' and I said, 'But these two girls were laughing too.' and she just walked away. So Steven [an outspoken student] said to her,

'You can't talk to her like that.'" Georgina asked, "He was defending you?" "Yeah," Jamie responded.

The students also showed support for each other by encouraging the shyer students to talk back to the teacher. They also felt that the teacher did not like some students and would pick on these students more than others. They defended those students despite their behaviour. When Mr. Smith had included Berthe in the group of students he called "dumb sheep" she was absent from school, but she was told about it by her classmates the next day. Berthe, on behalf of the group who had been called "dumb sheep," told the principal about the incident. The group depended on her to defend them against the teacher's name calling and harassment.

Good Teaching

When the students gave their opinions on school, they often talked about what their teacher did wrong and what a "good" teacher should do. The group talked about students who misbehaved in class by "swearing and everything and he [the teacher] just ignored them. They got worse because he didn't do anything." I asked them what the teacher should do. These are some of their responses: "He should tell them right at the beginning not to swear." "Maybe talking to them, like when all the other kids are gone, he could ask them why they did that and talk to them." Another student continued: "And if they need help he should help them." In a group discussion about what makes a good teacher, Joseph answered, "Someone who's fair to everybody and doesn't pick on you." Berthe said that a good teacher "would try to understand what the kids are trying to say and what they mean by it." Other students responded to Berthe's statement: "And try to explain things so the kids understand, so they don't have trouble." "And to be kind-hearted." "Someone who doesn't jump to conclusions, like when

you're doing something the teacher automatically thinks you're doing something else." In another conversation, the students talked about how a teacher disciplines a class or gets the class to quiet down. They felt that the yelling their teacher did was completely ineffective:

> [Joseph] Like he says, 'If I catch you guys talking about something yak, yak, yak and you guys will be in deep trouble, I'll get you.'
> And we talk again about something social.
> And he catches us and says, 'If I catch you one more time you're in trouble.' And he keeps saying it over and over.
> [Berthe] He yells at us, but Mrs. Dawson, she would just look at us and everyone is quiet.
> [Jamie] Mrs. Dawson has more power over us than Mr. Smith does. As a teacher, she has more power over the classroom than Mr. Smith.
> [Georgina] That's why everybody likes her.
> [Berthe] She just looks at us and we behave.
> [Jamie] And he starts yelling and we don't!

In another conversation the group was talking about the kind of teacher they would want to teach them: "A nice teacher, that doesn't just tell you stories about their own life." "A teacher that actually has fun." "Makes jokes that are real." "Makes everyone normal." "Makes sure he plans trips and whatever." The group talked about doing a special art project and the way the instructor treated them, "She wants to tell you what to do, and I knew what to do." "It was supposed to be our program. Yeah, she painted some of it after. She was painting all over it." The students said that a good teacher would let students do their own work. One noted, "I [can] at least try. It's not important what it looks like."

Discipline

The students talked a lot about what they thought was good discipline, they thought that this was a sign of good teaching. The students did not think that sending students to the office solved anything. "Like, some of the boys in the school, we overhear them saying [to another boy in

the class], 'Hey, I'll meet you in the office.' and then they start talking back to the teachers and then one gets sent to the office and then the other one does and [they're] in the office together." The group said that when students were sent to the office: "Don't let them play games or anything." "Yeah, give them a book to [do] work." They also talked about the students who get suspended. They felt that these were the worst behaved students who break the rules: "Like fighting, or swearing and they're supposed to be suspended for three days, but they get suspended for one day." "Some of them, like Michael was supposed to be suspended for five days and he came back after one day. And another time he pinned me on the ground and he was supposed to be suspended for three days, but then they let him come back the next day 'cause we were going on a field trip." The group said that suspending students did not help them because: "They want to take time off school and they don't change." There are times when the students on suspension do not spend it at home, but in the office and "They say, 'Oh, we had so much fun, we played with computers and then we went outside to play some games,' but when we [the good students] get sent to the office, we have to work." Joseph claimed that the "teachers are too soft on the bad kids. 'Cause, like, we don't get into much trouble so they think that they have to be hard on us and everything. But if [the bad] kids get into a lot of trouble then they think that you have problems or something, so they won't be so mean. So they're a little nicer to bad kids."

The group said that there were some students who were given special treatment with their school work as well. When their teacher talked to them about the grade six government exams they said he explained that, even though some students would not pass the tests, it did not mean that

they had to be in grade six another year. The group started to talk about how some students do not do any work, but they will still pass:

> They [the bad students] swear at the teacher, they go to the office and the come back late and do nothing.
> All they do at school is fool around and get into trouble.
> Last year we worked hard and we passed and they didn't do anything and they still passed, they're just too bad. Teacher's don't want to keep them.
> If they pass, man, I'll die. I'll be so mad.
> They're going to pass.
> They get a special pass, they're going into that special program, I.O.P.
> We had to do them [government exams] ourselves.
> Maybe they need help but it's not fair.

The group believed one of the reasons that Mr. Smith allowed the bad students to get away with things is because "He's so old. He forgets." Georgina told a story of events which happened at the end of the year. "Some of the kids were outside or something. They were racing around. And then Walter went there, outside, and he [Mr. Smith] didn't even care where they are. And I said, 'You don't even know where the kids are.' Because there were hardly any kids in the classroom. And he's like, 'Don't tell me I don't know where my kids are! I do know where my kids are!'" When I asked Georgina why she said that to him, she told me that she got into trouble for leaving the classroom to get a drink, but some students were able to leave the classroom whenever they wanted: "He lets the bad kids go out whenever they want."

Towards the end of the year, the students challenged the teacher even more and the stories they told in the group became more extreme. In the same day that Georgina questioned the teacher about where his students were, Georgina and Jamie witnessed their teacher get angry at one of the "problem" students. "I [Georgina] was taking a drink in the hall and

Darwin said to Mr. Smith 'I don't want to go to the office' and he turned back, and Mr. Smith grabbed him and threw him. Like, from here to there." She continued, "She [Jamie] was so scared, she ran out of the classroom, her face was all red. And she was saying "Oh my God!"

Summary

The student's experience of education was influenced by many factors. Their families, community and their cultural backgrounds affected the way they understood school and their educational expectations. The low socioeconomic environment of the school's community affected the way they understood life. Their relationship with their teacher was central to how they experienced and understood school. They were unhappy in the classroom and developed strategies of defiance towards the teacher's authority. The dynamics of the group directly affected the stories the students chose to share and the group's attitude towards the stories.

CHAPTER V

INTERPRETATIONS

"People must not be typecast, but discovered"
Perez & Torres-Guzman, 1992

This study was guided by the question: In what ways can a group of Grade 6 students from a low socioeconomic area be potentially empowered to deal better with their community and school environments? This reflects the overall purpose of the study, which was to examine how this group of low socioeconomic students understood their lives and the role that education played in their lives. The study also examined the ways in which the students dealt with their situations and tried to make changes. This chapter includes a discussion of the themes that emerged from my analysis of the data. In a sense this chapter is a presentation of the second level of analysis of the data. The first level of analysis was presented in Chapter IV. There I attempted to present the students' understandings of their experiences in their own words. This second level of analysis includes more of my interpretations of the data.

Themes

Through the various levels of data analysis five themes emerged: 1) relationship between the school and community, 2) empowerment, 3) claiming an education: student voice, 4) change, and 5) poverty stereotypes. In the discussion that follows I examine each of these themes in turn.

Relationship Between the School and Community

One of the specific research questions asks how a group of students in a low socioeconomic area experience the relationship between the school and community. Another asks how the nature of the low

socioeconomic community affects the school environment. Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1990) argued that the "plight of the inner-city underclass stems from a weakening of basic social institutions" which they claimed is a result of prolonged unemployment and welfare existence (p. 14). The concentration of joblessness in the inner city creates:

> social isolation, sequestering inner-city families from role models who can show that steady employment is an achievable goal and that there is a link between schooling and adult life chances. (p. 14)

This suggests that the community that surrounds children of poverty offers little motivation for them to strive for success in school and work. This point notwithstanding, I contend that the relationship between school and community that students from the inner city experience, depends on their understanding of that community. That understanding is heavily influenced by their cultural and family backgrounds. For example, students' family backgrounds may affect their motivation for achieving academically. Some parents are very concerned with their children doing well in school because they want their children to have opportunities for a successful life, opportunities that the parents did not have themselves. Students' motivation for being successful in school, may be to secure high paying jobs and therefore ensure a means of leaving the community.

In this section I examine the relationship, as experienced by the students who participated in this study, between the school and community under the headings, "Safety in the Neighborhood" and "Characteristics of a Low Income Community."

<u>Safety in the School and Neighborhood</u>

To understand how the students in this study experienced the relationship between the school and community, it is necessary to examine the students' knowledge and understanding of the low socioeconomic area

in which the school is located. Schorr (1989) described the children who grow up in poverty as being "subject to the strains that low incomes and depleted neighborhoods impose on family life" (p. 154). When I asked the students to describe the school's neighborhood, their immediate response was "It's not safe." The main reason they gave for this area being unsafe was "the dangerous people who lived there." The students talked about drunks who chased them, men who made passes at the female students, prostitutes who solicited on street corners close to the school and youth gangs who would bully them and steal their things. They talked about being afraid of these people and what they would do if one of them was in danger: "I'd scream." "I'd run away." Even though not all the students presently lived in this neighborhood, they all had at one time. They were very aware of the dangers of living in this area. The "fixed up" apartment buildings that seemed respectable to the outside observer still had, according to the students, dangerous people living in them. The students told stories of people who were unemployed and spent their time drinking, and of people who would vandalize the buildings and threaten the people who lived in them. The students talked about the "bad people" who frightened the "good people." They were not part of the groups that were threatening. Their parents did not get drunk. The students in this study thought they were the "good people" who had to avoid the "bad people." In this way, the students disassociated themselves from the problems in the community, and from the community itself.

Wilson (1987) defined social isolation as "the lack of contact or of sustained interaction with individuals and institutions that represent mainstream society" (p. 60). The inner city community is socially isolated from mainstream society but, within the inner city itself, some groups are

socially isolated from the mainstream of that community. The descriptions that the students in the study gave of their community, was evidence of the social isolation the Native population had in the community and the Native students had in the school. Schorr (1989) explained that social isolation in poor communities results from people not being able to be supportive of their neighbors "because their own needs exceed their resources" (p. 154). The students in the study thought the Native population was "bad and caused most of the trouble." They were not interested, however, in helping these people in their community, just in avoiding them.

When we talked about safety in the community, the students spoke of how the school could also be unsafe. The people who were dangerous in the community would sometimes come into the school. The students told stories about the drunks who came in to the school and bothered them and yelled at the secretaries. The students mentioned that items were stolen from the school and said that they could have been stolen by strangers in the school. School safety was also an issue in the community. Students were confronted with this issue when walking to school and playing on the school grounds. The female students talked about being harassed by men when they were walking to school or on their way home. Joseph talked about being chased by youth who wanted to steal things from him. The students said there was also a lot of vandalism in the school because it was in such a dangerous neighborhood.

The students understood that the community was a dangerous place. There were areas and buildings that they stayed away from. They knew that it was dangerous to go anywhere in the community after dark. Their understanding of the relationship between the school and the community was that school could also be unsafe. At the same time, they saw the school

as a place that would help them if they had problems at home. They said they could talk to a counselor or teacher if they had home problems. They mentioned that strangers did not come into the school any more, and that the police would come to their school to talk about safety in the neighborhood. Their parents allowed them to play in the school yard after school hours because "It's safer than the park and ravine."

The concern for safety in the neighborhood was another aspect of the nature of the low socioeconomic community which affected the school environment. Addressing the social problems that exist in a low socioeconomic community was an important aspect of the school culture. The people in the community saw the school as a safe place where they could get food and clothes. The principal explained that they "had parents who have come in drunk and drugged to the gills, knowing that we're going to make sure that their children weren't going to go home with them." In this unsafe community, the parents thought of the school as a safe place. The principal explained that the parents understood that the school would "make sure the students were safe, and that they [the school] would get them [the parents] the help they need. We've driven many an individual to rehab."

Characteristics of a Low Income Community

The environment of the school was affected by the nature of the low socioeconomic community. Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1990) said that schools in low socioeconomic areas have had to recognize that the reason for the "disaffection and nonconforming behaviours" (p. 131) of the students in these schools are multiple and interrelated with the community. Natriello, McDill and Pallas made the argument that the characteristics of the community affect students' performance in school. Furthermore, the

school must be concerned with these characteristics, which Natriello, McDill and Pallas called liabilities, and directly address the needs of the students' that arise as a result of these liabilities. Natriello, McDill and Pallas included in their list of liabilities:

> Personal, familial, and community problems such as teenage pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse, delinquent gang membership, single-parent families, family violence and family financial need. [As well as] socially disorganized communities characterized by poor social control, which is linked to a variety of forms of social deviance. (p. 131)

The students in the study understood that an aspect of the nature of this community was that it was needy; the people who lived there did not have very much money. It was necessary for the school to assist students with the physical necessities of food and clothing. The school provided students with a breakfast and snack program. During an interview, the principal said that these programs were necessary to meet the food needs of some students. The school also provided food hampers for students from "families who don't have any money left at the end of the month for food. Their [welfare] cheque doesn't make it to the end of the month, for whatever reason." The students talked about having to wear their older siblings clothes and not having enough money to buy new clothes. The school had a clothing drive in which other schools collected clothing and distributed it to the students in this school. The students in the group talked to me about helping to sort the clothes, but they did not talk about receiving any of the free clothing from the drive. They did mention that one of the teachers gave one of the students in their class some jeans. The students understood that the school helped some of those students who were not looked after at home but, because it did not directly affect them, they did not really know what was done. They did know that one of the students

in their class had his clothes washed at school. When I asked them why these students did this they shrugged, "No one does it at home."

The school provided a life skills program for those students who were not cared for at home. The principal said it was "For those kids who come in [to school] in a messy state. They can take a shower first thing in the morning, and we have extra clothes. They know they can get themselves cleaned up." The students in the group were either unaware of the special services that the school provided for neglected and needy students, or they were unwilling to discuss it with the group.

The students understood that the community was in a lower income area, where people were unemployed and did not have a lot of possessions. They talked about the school being short of resources as well. They did not say that the school was poor, but they did talk about other schools as being rich and having a lot more resources than they had. The students' experience of the relationship between the community and the school included being fed by the school. The breakfast and snack program was provided by the school because, in the school's low socioeconomic area, many students did not get enough food to eat at home. The students in the group understood that there were some students who came to school hungry, but they did not really understand why. They thought that perhaps there was no one at home to prepare the food for those hungry students, or that those students simply did not like the food that had been prepared at home. Some of the students in the group came from families that needed government financial assistance. These students had a better understanding of money concerns.

The students in the group were aware of the extra services that the school provided, but they distanced themselves from the poverty in the

community. When they talked about the hot lunch that students from a middle class school bought for them, they said that they were not [the students in the study] poor and they did not need the free food. The students had started to understand the differences between social classes. They knew they were part of the class that society had decided needed assistance. They may not have understood that being part of this class limited their future possibilities, but they did understand that they did not have the same opportunities as students from richer schools. They talked about those schools having more resources, like more computers and smaller class sizes. They thought that their school needed more resources. Talking about social inequities that existed made the students feel uncomfortable. They did not, however, express anger at social inequities, they were just beginning to understand the effect that these inequities had on their lives. Discussions of issues related to poverty created tensions among the students. They could talk about the dangers that existed in the community, because they were not part of the group that caused the trouble. However, when they were included in the low socioeconomic group (such as when they received the free hot lunch), they felt inferior and part of the ugliness of that community. They wanted to change the topic and move on.

The principal explained that the physical effects of poverty transferred to a variety of other areas. The school was required to deal with these other areas. The school also provided social workers for those students who needed that support because as the principal explained, "Children who come to school without enough food to eat, [may also] come in with other kinds of baggage as well." She went on to explain that the "school works hard to meet the basic need of families, because without that,

without kids having their basic needs met, it's really hard to get into the academics, by any stretch of the imagination."

The school also offered adult English as a Second Language classes and Early Intervention Programs. The new playground became the clean and safe park for the rest of the neighborhood to play in. The school served the needs of the community beyond the education of their children.

People' awareness of the nature of the community shaped their relationships with the school. Students were aware of the dangerous nature of the neighborhood and expressed their fear and understanding of the lack of safety that existed. They were aware of who the "bad people" were and what they did. The staff at the school was aware of the nature of the neighborhood and understood that this meant providing extra services at school, such as clothing and food. The parents of the students and other members of the community were aware of the nature of the school and understood that it was a safe place that would provide them with any help or assistance they needed.

Empowerment

The theme of empowerment is central to understanding the students' educational experience. The research questions guided an exploration of the circumstances in which students from a low socioeconomic area felt empowered and disempowered in the school environment. This section presents a discussion of empowerment under the headings: "Student's Understanding of Power," "When Students Feel Empowered," "Empowerment for Whom?," "Student Diversity," "Empowerment and Change," "Talk as Empowerment," and "Disempowerment."

Students' Understanding of Power

According to Robinson (1994) empowerment is "a personal and social process, a liberating sense of one's own strengths, competence, creativity and freedom of action (p. 7)." The students' strengths lay in their survival strategies. They chose to fight back against what they perceived to be the teacher's unfairness. This was how they chose to express their freedom of action. Johnson (1991) stated that students "make the most important of all educational decisions: whether or not to stay in school, and if they choose to stay, whether to learn" (p. 6). The students who participated in this study were not given the power to make the decision to be in school; they were legally required to be there. They did, however, make the decision as to whether to participate. Talking back was something the teacher could not control; it became their expression of freedom. This may have been an act of strength, but did it help them to grow? The students did not fight back by demanding a better education, they merely complained that the teacher was unfair. They blamed the teacher for not teaching well and for treating them unfairly. They may have been asserting their power and presence in the classroom, but this did not have an impact on their education. The teacher reacted to the students' strategy with anger and an attempt to control the students even more.

Before the students could be empowered it was necessary for them to understand the power that was oppressing them. This entailed an understanding of the middle class influence on education. Forsyth and Tallerico (1993) explained that "public education had successfully focused blame for the failure of school to meet the needs of minority students onto these students" (p. 101). The ability of the students to understand the

inequities of the educational system, may have been limited by their youth and the difficulties inherent in the task of critiquing the only educational system they knew. They may have understood that social inequities existed, but thought if they worked hard in school they could overcome those inequities. Arcinega (1977) said that this attitude of placing the blame for educational failure on students' poverty background, is a form of middle class control over the low socioeconomic class:

> The reasons for failure in school are said to be the fault of poor homes, cultural handicaps, linguistic deficiencies, and deprived neighborhoods. The fact that schools are geared primarily to serve monolingual, white, middle-class, and Anglo clients is never questioned. (p. 54)

The students knew what it meant to live in a low socioeconomic area. They also had an understanding of the inequities that existed between richer and poorer schools. They believed that schools that had more money had more resources and, therefore, offered a better education. Fighting back in the classroom meant fighting the teacher's comments and attitudes. By talking back and supporting each other, the students became empowered to fight back. They did not, however, take actions that might change the quality of their education or have an effect on the inequity of the educational system. In fact, their actions may have served to deflect attention away from the root causes of the inequity.

The students may not have had the maturity to understand that their conflict with their teacher did not improve their educational potential and future circumstances. The students had the potential to decide what they wanted from school and their education. They understood that a good education (which they said included post secondary education) could lead to a better life than their parents had. Their parents were not educated and

wanted more for their children. The students could empower themselves by doing well in school, getting a good paying job and improving their social status. Yet, the only power the students expressed in the classroom was through fighting with their teacher. Paradoxically, this may have diminished their chances at educational success.

The improvement in financial and social status, that the students thought a better education would give them, would mean long-term social empowerment for these students. When the students talked about their educational expectations and aspirations, they said they wanted to do well in school so they "could get a good job." Education was important to them because they wanted a secure financial future. They talked about how unfair they thought it was that some schools had more than others, but the unfairness of the system did not concern them. They were not interested in changing the system, but rather in finding a way to be successful in a system in which they were kept on the outside.

An example of the students' lack of understanding about the educational system, can be found in their thoughts about the grade six government examinations. When I asked the students how they thought they would do on the exams, they said they thought they would do well. Their teacher however, told me that he did not believe that many of them would do well. This proved to be true. When we discussed the exams after they had written them, they said it was their teacher's fault; that he had failed to teach them the necessary information they needed to know to do well on the exams. The students were not critical of the educational system that forced them to write standardized government exams. They told me that they thought the government wanted them to write the exams because, "They want to know how much we know, if we're good students." By not

doing well on the exams, the students believed they had proven that they were not good students, and they blamed the teacher for this. The teacher, however, was very critical of the examinations and of the government for giving the same examination to every student despite the differences in backgrounds and schools: "What is their purpose? If it is to compare the results with other schools, then we won't do well." He continued, "To use the results as some way to identify schools that are very low, for a reason that is beyond their control, would be very unfair." He told the students that not doing well on these examinations would not mean they would fail grade six. He said to me that his motivation for telling the students this was to "relieve some of the pressure of the exams." He wanted the students to understand that these examinations would not affect their marks. The students misunderstood his comments and thought he meant that, regardless of how well they did on these exams, all the students would pass. They did not think this was fair. They complained that there were some students who did not work hard at school and got into trouble, and they would pass grade six anyway. The teacher's attempt to have the students critique the educational structure did not work because the students were only concerned with achieving the government standards and in proving that they could do well in this system. Freire (1970) explained that the inability of the oppressed to understand the inequity of their situation is the result of the oppressor's control over their development:

> It is not surprising that the banking concept of education regards people as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view

> of reality deposited on them. The more the oppressed can be led to adapt to the situation which oppresses them, the more easily they can be dominated. (p. 60)

The students' understanding of power created a paradoxical situation. If they rebel, they are dismissed and cannot influence change. If they are passive students who do what they are told, then they help maintain the status quo and that is interpreted to mean that no changes are needed.

When Students Feel Empowered

The specific research questions related to empowerment required an examination of ways in which the students felt empowered. Some students said that talking back to the teacher made them feel that they had more control over the teacher than the students who did not talk back. Adams (1991) stated that empowerment means "becoming powerful" (p. 208) and, in the case of the students who talked back to the teacher, the power that they took from the teacher was to challenge his authority. The challenge to his authority gave them more control in the student-teacher relationship. These students felt that fighting back with the teacher gave them more control and thus, they were empowered. They felt strength in a situation that they believed was intended to control them. But did the survival strategies that the students employed, such as talking back to the teacher, truly empower them in the classroom? The pattern of the teacher's responses to the students' confrontations was predictable: when the students talked back, the teacher got angry and disciplined the students. Because the teacher had the authority to impose sanctions on the students when they misbehaved by talking back, they did not gain control in the classroom, they lost it. So the defiance that the students asserted did not improve their educational opportunities. In most cases it hurt their educational chances because they were typecast by the teacher as "the

trouble makers" and students who "would not do well." The teacher may have decided that, because he thought the students who talked back had "bad attitudes" towards school, then it was not worth giving them the help they would have needed to succeed academically.

When the students who talked back were told by the teacher that they had bad attitudes and would not do well at school they were not empowered. The students who did not talk back to the teacher said that they were "afraid to get into trouble." The other students said that the teacher did not pick on the quiet students (the ones who did not talk back), because "he thought they were so good." The more aggressive students in the group (the ones who did talk back) chided the quieter members in the group for being "goodie two shoes, and never talking back." However, the teacher's perception of the quieter students was that they were doing very well academically and that they stood the best chance of going on to post secondary education. But the passivity required for them to be so esteemed by the teacher left them as disempowered as their defiant counterparts.

Empowerment for Whom?

Adams' (1991) definition of empowerment embodied two dimensions: "being given power and taking power" (p. 208). When the students talked back to the teacher, they were attempting to take power. Education also has the potential to give power. Education that serves the needs and aspirations of the student, empowers that student. This form of empowerment must be given, because students cannot take it. For some students simply being at school and having the educational opportunity to acquire a better life than their parents is empowerment. School serves these students because they believe they will get what they want from a good education: a successful life. Immigrant children and the children of

immigrant parents, may stand a better chance of succeeding academically than do the generationally poor Canadian children. These parents believe that Canada could offer them a better life than the country they left, and education becomes the tool for their children to achieve this. Many immigrant parents want their children to work hard at school so the children can have the educational and thus, employment opportunities that they, themselves did not have. This reflects belief in the notion that if children have a better education than their parents, then they could move up the social ladder, and acquire social status and financial rewards. According to the teacher of the students in the study, immigrants often believed that the poor neighborhood they lived in was a temporary stop and they work hard at making enough money to move out of the area. The teacher told me that this was the goal of the immigrant parents of the students in the class: "There are two or three moves a year. It may take some longer to make the money to move than others, but they all go. The ones who can't get the money together stay behind." When I asked which families stayed behind, he told me they were the ones, "Who are used to this, who don't think they can go anywhere else."

The teachers may also have higher educational expectations of immigrant children or the children of immigrants than they do of other students in the low socioeconomic classroom. If immigrant parents put pressure on their children to do well at school so that they can make the most of educational opportunities, then this may also affect the attitude that the teacher has towards these students. They work harder because they are the children of immigrants and they want to achieve, therefore, the teachers have higher expectations of these students. The teacher's attitude is transmitted to the student so the student believes that he/she can do well

in school. The student may also believe that he/she must do well in school, and is willing to put in the time and effort to succeed.

The teacher of the students in the group told me that, with some students, "There is poverty and you don't see it. The kids come on time, they've had breakfast, they are looked after, and you find out, surprise, nobody works in the family. I mean, nobody has a regular job. They are still doing enough to put the kids together." I asked the teacher why he thought "some families who live in low socioeconomic areas are able to help their children with education and others can't?" His answer was, "Parenting skills, you can have somebody working at GWG, the mother. And the father is probably working somewhere else and they make sure that the kids do their homework." I asked if he thought the culture of the parents had anything to do with some parents being more involved with their children's education. He responded:

> I'm not sure. I may find in general [that] Orientals are upwardly mobile and others are standard, stand still, nothing happens. But the kids that are around here, that stay, they [their parents] are not working, so the kids are falling back into the same neglect.

I asked which students fall back into that neglect and he answered, "The Canadians" which he later clarified as: "The Native Canadians." I mentioned that there were some Asian females in the group of students I was working with who were very quiet, and I asked him if they were good students. His response was:

> Yeah. Very. And that's the only [way] to compare. They are working. You know, they ask for homework, 'What do we have to do?' I say, 'Now slow down. You don't have to do all of that.' They will work. If you tell them to do more work, they will do it. But the others [will say], 'Oh, we have to do homework? You're kidding!'

I asked him if parental influence had anything to do with why these students worked hard in school. His response was:

> Oh yes. Depending on the emphasis at home on learning, [this] is how you find the kids performing in school. I mean, you have a single-parent family with four kids. Usually nobody accepts them, sometimes they survive.

He further explained that some of the immigrant parents could not use their educational qualifications in Canada:

> Some people have skills that they can't use yet. You know, somebody was a pharmacist in Vietnam, but she can't do it here because she wouldn't be qualified, or she's a herbalist. So she has to find some other jobs, which is difficult.

This increased the pressure that these parents put on their children to achieve in school. They have an education that they cannot use, so they want to ensure their children get an education that will help them succeed. The teacher mentioned that the parents who were refugees were often older because of the upheaval in their lives and they had waited to start a family. He suggested that this may have brought a level of severity or strictness to the parental/child relationship. The children were expected to work hard at school, and not cause any trouble.

The teacher talked about the difference in immigrant children: "You know, like, okay, Latins, you know, Salvadorians, from San Salvador, they are entirely different. The kids usually do what they want. And you know, they work really hard." He went on to explain that, "Almost every family is different. I really can't say anything is the exact same."

Schorr (1989) wrote about teacher expectations being different for low socioeconomic students: "teachers simply assume that parents of poor children are 'so busy trying to earn the bread and butter, they don't have time to motivate them,' and that teachers therefore ask less of the children

-- and teach less" (p. 238). The cultural background of the student also had an effect on the educational expectations of the teacher. The success of a student depended on whether or not she/he would graduate from high school. Even though they had only reached the sixth grade, the teacher said he already knew which students would not finish high school. "I would say the Canadian [Native] kids will drop out of school." When I asked what would happen to them, his response was: "They usually end up in trouble one way or another. Out of work, some of them are probably still getting the money coming from being treaty status." I asked him why he thought that this group of students did not do as well as the children of immigrants. His response was, "Complete lack of backing from home. You have a meeting, you agree, [they] talk nicely and [say] 'Yes, we will do this. We will do this.' Forget it. Nothing ever happens." I asked him why he thought that the Native students did not receive parental support. He answered:

> I went to some sweat lodges and everything, and they blame everything on the missionary schools. I can't buy it completely. There's only so much you can do. Sooner or later, somebody has to do something for himself. I don't believe that, you know, just by blaming somebody else for your problems forever is going to solve it. You still have to work.

Because of their cultural backgrounds, there were some students who were empowered more than others in the classroom. Their parents were perceived as working hard, and therefore the children had more potential. To be a Native student meant that you had to overcome your, according to the teacher, "neglectful upbringing," in order to be successful academically.

School "gives empowerment" to students who fit "the mould", such as the students of immigrant families but does not empower students who do

not fit the mold. Those who fit comfortably into structures are "good" and therefore, empowered. Those who do not fit comfortably in that structure are "bad" and therefore dismissed or disempowered. These stereotypical expectations serve as a form of oppression of which some teachers are unaware.

Student Diversity

In the first chapter, I noted that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are not a homogeneous group. There are differences in gender, race, culture, finances, and family background. These various elements shape individual students' understanding of their relationship with the school. Forsyth and Tallerico (1993) stated that the "issue of diversity in urban schools developed initially out of a concern for students from various racial/ethnic groups and lower socioeconomic backgrounds" (p. 99). However, student diversity has been expanded to include "not only social and ethnic backgrounds, but also intra-group differences in learning rates, motivation, and other factors that result in varied achievement outcomes" (p. 99). Student diversity in the inner city context means differences in "native language groups as well as diversity in developmental stages, home academic support, "giftedness," religion, and handicapping conditions" (p. 99).

In some cultures defiance of the teacher is forbidden, so there are some students who would not talk back to the teacher. The teacher understood this to mean these students were better behaved and, therefore, he had a different attitude towards them than towards those who did talk back. This meant that the teacher was aware of the economic and cultural background of these students and this affected his teaching and discipline.

The effects of empowerment on these students were diverse because they were not a homogenous group. They had different understandings of power because their backgrounds were so diverse. For some students gaining power in the classroom meant achieving academically. For other students, gaining power in the classroom meant confronting the teacher. Their educational expectations were diverse, so the way in which they were empowered was different. For example, English as a Second Language students were empowered by the educational system because the system helped them learn English and, thus, enables them to participate in Canadian society. For each student, the system that oppresses them also provides some opportunities for empowerment. But that, for each student, is a very limited form of empowerment.

Empowerment and Change

Empowerment entails power and change. Kreisberg (1992) explained that, to begin the process of empowerment, the individual "must enter into a process of personal and institutional change that will lead to transformation" (p. 11). If the students in the study are successful in the present educational system, then what power have they claimed and what changes have they made? The students' educational expectations were that a good education would lead to success, which would lead to financial security. Through educational success, the students would achieve fiscal empowerment. The students believed that if they did well in school, then they would be able to get a better job than their parents. A good job would mean having more money; this would lead to a better lifestyle and a higher social status than that of their parents. Therefore, to these students, more money meant more influence in society and receiving greater financial benefits than their parents. Having greater social status can mean

demanding more from social institutions and obtaining greater political clout. Political clout could have an influence on social structures, including educational structures. Does an improved fiscal situation mean empowerment for the students in the study? They could obtain the power of financial clout, and change their social status. Having money would allow them to change from being in the low socioeconomic class to the middle class. Educational success would give students the opportunity to move out of poor areas and into a more comfortable middle class area. Educational empowerment for the low socioeconomic students in this study meant becoming successful in a middle class world and leaving their inner city world behind. The way to empowerment for these students was to become one of the oppressors.

Talk as Empowerment

I believe that talk itself can be empowering and that providing the students with a safe space to share their stories empowered them to claim their authentic voice in their schooling. At the end of the study, the students told me that the main reason they liked participating in this group was because, "You listened to what we had to say." For a group of eleven year-olds from low socioeconomic backgrounds, empowerment meant that they had someone to listen to their ideas, complaints and stories. The students were able to tell their stories without chastisement, and without any conditions. I sometimes engaged in the group discussions by questioning some of their points and challenging some of their comments. I did not do this very often because this had the potential of silencing the students. This may have been a limited form of empowerment because it was short term. The long term effects of this empowerment may be

impossible to determine, but I believe that the self confidence the students gained from having someone listen to them, will have long term benefits.

Disempowerment

There were circumstances when the students involved in this study felt disempowered in the school environment. The students explained that, at times they felt defenseless and weak. They observed that their talking back strategy did not work; the teacher did not seem to care. Joseph said, "So, what can I do? Nothing. It doesn't matter." Their voices and the voices of their parents were not listened to when they complained about the teacher. The immigrant parents were reluctant to say anything to the teacher or administration because they felt it might jeopardize their children's academic chances. Very often, parents in a low socioeconomic income bracket are not very well educated and they may not know how to complain to authorities. They have a distrust of authority and do not use any of their authority or clout to question the oppression of a social structure. They may not even know that they have such power. And they certainly do not have the economic or political clout of middle-class parents who often decide to organize and demand changes in the educational enterprise. They are uneducated so they feel intimidated by authority. Students can complain to authorities, but their complaints are likely to carry no weight.

Central to the examination of the theme of empowerment is the question, "Who has the power to bring about change?" Students have the power to decide whether to participate in the educational system. This is not a power given to students by teachers, but one that students take. The success of the educational system is dependent on students' participation and students can fail the system or make the system fail by choosing not to

participate. At the same time, however, teachers decide who will succeed in the educational process and this is a power that is given to students. The educational success of students is dependent on being given power and the system can fail the students if power is not given. The empowerment of the students to implement change in the educational system rests with the power that is given, not the power that can be taken.

The students in this study felt powerful in their classroom when they resisted the teacher and refused to participate. They did this out of a sense of outrage and fairness. The power the students took did not change their educational circumstances. The teacher had the power to decide who would be successful and he did not give this power to the students who chose to talk back. Ultimately, the students felt frustrated and dispirited because the power they took did not indicate change but seemed to make the situation worse. The disruptive students no longer had reason for doing work so the teacher would like them, they did not want his support. They had to balance their need to assert and protect themselves and the need to achieve good grades through compliance. The students felt helpless to make change because they felt that they had no impact on how the teacher treated them and the education they received. They either talked back and were disempowered or complacently maintained the status quo and were disempowered. Was there another choice available to these students?

The students in the pilot study school told me that the main rule in their school was, "No dissension." The administration in the pilot study school attempted to control the students' choice to participate. The choice to participate was ultimately the students, but they were aware of the educational expectations of their teacher. He expected them to participate in their education, and hoped that they would have a sense of ownership

and personal accomplishment in their academic success. Students were given the power to succeed in exchange for their cooperation. Did the power the students were given bring about change in their education situation? By giving the students power to succeed academically, the teacher was helping the students to take responsibility for their education. The teacher may not have directly helped students develop a critical consciousness, but he did help the students to accept their responsibility for their academic success. Education for these students was something in which they played an active role and claimed ownership and this can lead to the development of a critical consciousness.

Individuals who seek to achieve empowerment have a responsibility for action. For the students seeking educational empowerment, what is their responsibility for action that will lead to change? The next section presents an examination of the students' responsibilities and capacities in the enactment of their empowerment and ability to bring about change.

Claiming an Education: Student Voice

Johnson (1991) stated that student voice:

> can be considered as any activity in which the students exercise a degree of independence and control or communicate their feelings and identity to the school community. (p. 5)

In this section the use of student voice is discussed under the headings "Student Responsibility" and "Claiming Stories."

Student Responsibility

Johnson's definition of student voice requires that students take responsibility to participate in their educational experience. The independence that Johnson maintained is necessary for student voice and empowerment demands that students accept that they have an important

role in ensuring their academic success. The students who participated in this study did not take responsibility for their academic success. They expected to graduate from high school and go on to post secondary education. However, if they did not do well in school, they blamed their teacher: "He's too old, he forgets." "He likes some students more than others." "He said that I have a bad attitude, [that is why] I don't get good marks." The argument could be made that perhaps these students were too young to understand their responsibility in the claiming of their education. However, the grade six students in the pilot study understood what was expected of them academically, and the part they played in their academic achievement. The students from the main study blamed the teacher for not teaching them the right information. For example, as noted in the previous section, the teacher thought they would do poorly on the government exams, but the students thought they would do well. When the students did not do well, they blamed the teacher for not teaching the right things. They did not criticize or question the government for giving the examinations in the first place. These students did not claim their education. They depended on their teacher to give them the right answers and to teach them the facts that they needed to know in order to do well on tests. They did not see education as a means to learning ways to explore, to critique, or to develop.

This illustrates the point that to be empowered or to assume responsibility for their own success, inner city students need to be far more mature and sophisticated than what is expected of middle class students. In a sense, that students did not have responsibility for their own success has more to do with the structures of schooling and society than it does with qualities of the children. It is difficult for students to resist

oppression in a system in which hierarchical power relationships are entrenched, and have been accepted as "correct" for many generations and is one their parents and teachers support.

Claiming Stories

In Chapter I, I wrote about the students claiming their stories. Did they claim their stories? I contend that although they may not have claimed their voices as they pertain to schooling, they did claim their stories. They talked about different ways to deal with what they thought was their teacher's unfairness. They talked about not approving of their parents' and family's racism. They talked about going to the principal to complain about the teacher. In doing so, these students were searching for, exploring and attempting to assert their voices. So, although it was to a limited extent, they did begin to claim responsibility for their academic success and their education. They complained to the teacher and principal, when they thought there was unfairness in the classroom. They did not however, complain about the unfairness of the educational structure. The students said that they would complain about curriculum if they thought it was unfair or racist. Otherwise, they said that they would "Do the work the teacher told us to."

Change

Empowerment implies that people obtain the knowledge to change their circumstances. Change did occur in this study. There was change in the social awareness of the students through group discussions. This may have led to change in their educational circumstances or situation. In this section the changes that occurred are examined under the headings "Change in the Students" and "Thinking Critically."

Change in the Students

I believe that the students changed over the course of the study. In the three month time frame of the study, the students opened up and told their stories. They talked frankly about their teacher, their families and their lives. They demonstrated this change in the group discussions. Some students opened up and talked about feelings that they had never talked about before. The safety of the group discussions allowed them to talk about racism, poverty and the power struggles that existed in their classroom. They also expressed their views on good teaching and their expectations for education. They talked about what their rights in the classroom were, and how they wanted to be treated at school. They talked about how this group provided them with the opportunity to talk about such topics. They said they were not able to talk about these things with their peers because they would not listen, or take them seriously.

Even though change did occur with the students in this study it was of a limited nature. The changes that occurred were of less dramatic nature because of fundamental barriers. The students were not in a position to make major structural changes to their education or to negotiate change with their teacher. They could change their attitudes and understanding about their education, but they could not develop a plan of action to bring about structural change.

Thinking Critically

Perhaps the most significant change the students experienced was in beginning to analyze critically their education. Being able to talk about their ideas on these subjects for the first time may have sparked critical reflection in the students. They assessed their opinions and actions during the group discussions. They gave each other suggestions about how to deal

with situations in the classroom, such as those that involved what they perceived to be unfair treatment by the teacher or mistreatment by difficult students. Through critical reflection they were beginning to develop a better understanding of their education. When they began talking about their educational experiences, they concentrated on criticism of their teacher. During the course of the study, they began to discuss social structural effects on their education, such as, living in a low socioeconomic area and attending an inner city school.

The students talked about how they would "talk back to the teacher" as a means of dealing with his unfairness. There were some students at the beginning of the project, who did not discuss talking back to the teacher. As the project went on, the quieter students would tell stores about how they were now "talking back." Did they change over the course of our project? Some of the students seemed to become more outspoken with the teacher as the project went on and this did not necessarily prove to be beneficial to the students. This may have been a result of the group discussions.

The critical aspect of this study provided the students with a vehicle to move from sharing their personal stories to understanding the reasons why they receive the schooling they do. It was an opportunity for students to examine the educational and social structures that determine the structures of their schooling. Did we move beyond their understanding of their experiences at school and ask why they received this education?

I asked the students why they thought the teacher treated them the way he did. They said they did not know why: "Maybe because he's old. "He doesn't like us." They did not have the maturity or the overall perspective on society to understand the subtleties of his biases related to teaching

students from a low socioeconomic area. They were aware of the tensions that existed in the classroom. They talked about the different ways the teacher treated students. The Asian students did not cause as much trouble as some of the other students, and the teacher always answered their questions. They also understood that students from richer schools received a different kind of education than they did. They did not, however, understand why it was this way. They may have been too young to name the social inequities that they faced every day. When the students talked about the free hot lunch provided by a grade six class from a wealthier part of the city, it was clear that they did not understand why these students had bought them lunch. Some of the students suggested that it may have been because they were poor, but a socially critical understanding of that event did not emerge. They did question why their principal would allow something like this to happen. One student asked, "Why would Mrs. Jones ask them [a richer school] to buy us food?" Another students responded, "Because we're poor." To which another student argued, "No we're not." They questioned why students from a richer school would even bother to do this. One student asked, "Why feed us when they could feed themselves?" Is this a better understanding of the social system? Their attitude toward this event does suggest that, at some level, they understood a social inequity and felt the stigma. The students also talked about the differences between a rich school and their school. What they saw as the main difference was that the rich school had more resources and, if their school had more resources, then it would be a better school.

Poverty Stereotypes

The literature on poverty and education suggests that stereotypes related to the academic ability of students from low socioeconomic

backgrounds exist. This section is an examination of poverty stereotypes that were reinforced by the students and the teacher. The discussion is presented under the headings "At Risk Stereotype," "Students' Poverty Stereotypes," and "Teacher's Poverty Stereotypes."

At Risk Stereotype

Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1990) described the disadvantaged [low socioeconomic] student as being labeled an "at risk" student. The implication of this labeling, they explained, results in the "idea that a condition of being at risk results from a combination of individual and environmental characteristics" (p. 9). They stated that there were some benefits to this perspective:

> We must move beyond the common definition of disadvantaged status based on characteristics such as social class and ethnicity, to the identification of environmental circumstances which vary considerably within and across social-class and ethnic lines. By defining the disadvantaged population as possessing characteristics that make it susceptible to certain environmental conditions, we can avoid the conflict over whether the problem is located in the students and their family and community circumstances or in the schools. (p. 9)

There are problems with identifying disadvantaged students as being at risk. Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1990) stated that the "danger is that the terms 'at risk' and 'minority' are rapidly becoming synonymous, perpetuating racial stereotypes that have handicapped minorities for decades" (p. 10). Disadvantaged students are being labeled 'at risk' at very young ages, and this could create a poverty stereotyping for disadvantaged youth. They explained:

> Early identification might lead to the assignment of students to appropriate educational programs to help them overcome their problems and perform

> successfully in school, but it might also lead to the derogatory labeling of students and the self-fulfilling prophecy that consigns disadvantaged students to exposure to lower teacher expectations for their entire school careers. 'At risk' suggests an ability to predict how students might turn out in the future, which would lead to problems for students who otherwise would not have experienced them. (p. 10)

Students' Poverty Stereotypes

Are the students in this study living out the educational stereotypes of the poor or disadvantaged? The students' own actions and attitudes served in subtle ways to perpetuate these poverty stereotypes. What they wanted from education was a chance to get ahead socially and financially. They wanted a better life than their parents, and their parents wanted this for them as well. The role that they expected the teacher to play in their achievement of this goal was to be the provider of information and facts. They wanted the teacher to give them the information they needed to pass the tests and receive their secondary school diploma. It is questionable whether any student this age, regardless of economic background would have a different expectation of the teacher.

What role do the students play in reinforcing these stereotypes? What impact does their education have in the establishment of these stereotypes? How sensitive are they to the characteristics of these stereotypes?

The students perpetuated the poverty stereotypes of the people who caused trouble in low socioeconomic communities. In their description of the school's neighborhood, they talked about the "bad people" who made the area. When I asked them who the "bad people" were, the students often concluded that they were Native. There was a high Native population in the area, and the students believed that they were the cause of a lot of the

danger. The students did not think that they were being unfair or racist. They were asked to describe the school's neighborhood, and that description included stories about Natives who got drunk and caused trouble. Once Michael (a Native student) left the group, there were no Native students who participated in group discussions. It is difficult to know whether the students would have been as candid about their feelings towards Natives if there had been Native students in the group.

Teacher's Poverty Stereotypes

Poverty stereotyping was also evident in the type of education that the teacher provided; particularly in his low expectations for the students. He said that their backgrounds influenced how well the students could do in school, and he had already predicted who would graduate from high school. The students' and parents' acceptance of this educational attitude, reflects a subconscious acceptance of this stereotype. The teacher's assessment of educational opportunities for these students was that, "The ones who stay behind [in this community] will not do as well as the ones who leave." The teacher's main teaching style was to fill the students with as much information as he could in case somewhere down the line it became useful. He was teaching in the "banking concept of education" style that Freire (1970) described. More advanced intellectual skills of analysis and reflection were not taught to these students. Their teacher explained that most of these students have the disadvantage of not having books at home. He said that one of the main differences between these students and students from more affluent areas is that

> There's no reading at home. The parents don't read with their kids, or at all. The richer kids come to school with more knowledge and more experience.

> Their parents take them places, like museums. They travel and see things. With these kids, nothing. Their parents don't take them any where, or do anything [with them].

This affected what and how he taught the students because, "You have to start with basics, a lot of these kids don't have anything to build on. With kids from a wealthier background, you can do different things because they know more, are exposed to more. With these kids, a lot have [had an] interrupted education. You start with what they know, understand." This reinforces a middle class stereotype. Middle class families have more money than lower class families so can buy more books for their children and afford to take them on educational excursions. However, this does not necessarily mean that middle class parents read the books they buy to their children. Nor does it mean that, just because they can afford to go to museums, they take their children there.

There was an ironic tension that existed in this study. The students feared violence, and yet justified their own use of violence. They talked of the teacher's unfairness but believed they had the right to be unfair towards him. They did not take responsibility for their own actions, but insisted that the teacher be responsible. They felt they were justified in talking back to the teacher even though this form of resistance is a manifestation of the aggressive and violent culture they feared. They hated racism and yet were racist towards Native students. They could identify and describe the poverty stereotype that is cast on people from low socioeconomic areas. They were even able to critique this stereotyping, but they also played a part in perpetuating this stereotype. They continued to perpetuate the very system that oppressed them and of which they were beginning to be critical.

Summary

The "bigger picture" of the students' stories raised several questions. Are these students living out poverty stereotypes? Can they be empowered to deal better with their school environment? Have they the power and/or ability to effect change at the structural level of education? The discussion in this chapter of the themes that emerged from the findings, addresses these questions. Empowerment for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds is affected by an array of complex factors: cultural background, family influences, parental support, community factors, teacher's educational expectations and academic ability. There is some educational power that these students can take, they can challenge the teacher's authority. There is some educational power that must be given to them, the opportunity to succeed in school. Whether that power is given or taken, one effect of this empowerment remains the same: change occurs. The change that students wanted to make through becoming empowered with educational success, was to move out of the low socioeconomic area, and on to a more financially secure life. Ultimately, for the students in this study, empowerment meant being able to leave the world of poverty and the inner city.

CHAPTER VI

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

"We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know it for the first time."
T.S. Eliot, 1944

The purpose of this chapter is to offer reflections and recommendations which relate to the overall purpose of the study. In this chapter, I extend the findings discussed in Chapters IV and V, relating them to the literature discussed in previous chapters. The chapter also includes sections on recommendations for practice and further research. The chapter begins with reflections on the methodology.

Reflections on Application of the Methodology

The intent of this study was to explore the educational experiences of students from a school in a low socioeconomic area. The study also examined ways in which these students could be potentially empowered to deal better with their community and school environments. The research was guided by four specific questions: (1) How does a group of students in a low socioeconomic area experience the relationship between the school and community? (2) How does the nature of the low socioeconomic community affect the school environment? (3) In what circumstances do students from a low socioeconomic area feel empowered in the school environment? (4) In what circumstances do students from a low socioeconomic area feel disempowered in the school environment?

I was interested in having the students share their experiences and impressions of their school and community. I wanted them to reflect both on why their lives were the way they were and on what they could do to improve the "situation." Using group discussions as a means of collecting

data allowed issues and concerns pertaining to poverty to come from the students. Traditionally, studies of disadvantaged students have dealt with the effects of poverty from the perspectives of teachers, administrators and policy makers. Such research has examined living conditions and educational experiences of low socioeconomic students. Although the study reported herein examined these same matters, it differed from most other studies by focusing on explicating the students' perspectives.

The group discussions used in this study provided a snapshot of the lives of students from a low socioeconomic background. The reason for choosing this approach was to have the students explain how they experience living in poverty.

Interpretive Study

My original intent was to do a critical theory study. I believed that this would provide the study with a necessary social analysis. But the "critical" edge of the study was blunted somewhat by problems. The problem that I faced related to my role in facilitating the kind of change that would be expected in a critical study. Certainly, I was interested in knowing the students' stories and how they understood their educational experiences. And we discussed the difficulties and problems that they had in their classroom, and the students talked about how they dealt with these. But we did not critically analyze why these problems existed. I was reluctant to move the students to change because, at such a young age, this could be potentially harmful to them. I also realized that when I left, the students would be without support from me. I did not want to push them to change and then leave them. They, not I, had to deal with the realities of their classroom. As the research began I recognized the ethical problems I

faced in doing a critical study and decided to work within the interpretive paradigm but always with a "critical" edge.

Group Influences

Three kinds of interpersonal factors influenced the nature of the data collected through group discussions. These factors related to the students' influences on each other, my influence on the students and their influence on me.

Members of a group have the potential of influencing the others. The ages of these students and their different backgrounds were factors that influenced the students in the group. There were some students who were more outspoken than others, and they were very forthright about the way they were treated by their teacher. This became apparent very soon into our group discussions. Initially, the quieter students did not express these feelings about the teacher. Eventually however, all of the students did. Peer influence was active in group discussions. The more outspoken students usually began the group discussions. The shyer students did not change the topics, but contributed their opinions. I did not attempt to stop or control group dynamics, but I did encourage the quieter students to share with the group. Though some students were outspoken, they did not intimidate other members of the group. There were some students who initiated many of the conversations, but they did not dominate group discussions. This group dynamic might have changed if Michael, the very aggressive student who decided not to join the group, had stayed.

This research requires the participation of the researcher as well as the students. This meant that I was able to share my stories and opinions with the students. It also meant that my participation could influence what was talked about and the students' reaction to topics. I tried to temper my

influence by qualifying my opinions before I spoke: "O.K., can I tell you what I think about my visit to the classroom? Then you can tell me what you think, if you like." I was concerned with imposing my opinions, attitudes and power over the group of students. I may have asked their permission to discuss something, but they never refused my requests and I never expected that they would. I could not, however, influence whether or not they responded.

Journals

The methodology used in this study was designed to collect data on student perspectives. The group discussions provided a useful means for bringing forward concerns and opinions of the students. I had hoped that journals would also provide a means through which students might communicate their views. My hope was that journals would not only be an alternative way for students to communicate with me, but that they would also share their journals with the group. At first, all the students made an attempt to use the journals, but after a month, most of them had stopped. I had told them that it was not necessary for them to keep a journal, but for the first month, I asked them for their journals. Some students brought their journals to the group, but I sent the other students back to their classes to get them. Some of the students stopped writing in their journals, and I finally stopped asking for them. The quieter students did continue to write in their journals for the entire project. They did not choose to share their journals in group discussions, although I did ask if they wanted to read them to the group. I continued to read them and write responses. The journals gave the quieter students a different form of voice.

Dwelling Place

Chapter I describes the importance of finding the dwelling place in the group where an attitude of caring, attention and trust is shared. It was necessary for me to establish a dwelling place with the students in the study, so that they felt safe to share their educational experiences. However, this raised some ethical concerns for me. Did I establish a dwelling place with these students because I was curious about their educational experience, or did I do this because I believed that this would help them? Was the personal change they went through because of this research beneficial to these students? Finding a dwelling place may be the way into action research, but what responsibilities did I have within the dwelling place? The students in this study were eleven years old. I attended to their young age by monitoring their reaction to topics. If the students felt uncomfortable talking about a topic, or if they did not want to talk about something, then we did not discuss it.

Positive and Negative Aspects of the Application of the Methodology

There were both positive and negative consequences to the use of this methodology. That students were able to find their voices was a very positive consequence. The opportunity for the students to share their views within the safety of a group provided for some very powerful findings. Having the students share their educational and life experiences in this way encouraged the students to open up and share their stories. I was interested in knowing how the students understood their education and their lives. The methodology used in the study proved to be an effective way of doing this.

Another positive consequence of the critical orientation of the study was that the students talked about concerns in education and came up with

ideas to improve their situation. We as a group, however, did not come up with a planned strategy for change and then go back and apply it to practice. However, the students did give each other suggestions for dealing with problems in the classroom (talking back to the teacher), but it was not discussed as a planned change strategy to be tried in the classroom and discussed with the group. And, of course, the strategy proved ineffective.

Change in this project was more elusive than I had originally understood it to be. Change came in the growth in the students' understanding of their situation. There was a change in the students' awareness of their lives and education. Their social awareness, became evident in their discussions on racism, poverty and inequities in the educational system.

For some students another change that may have occurred during the study was in the attitude that they developed towards the teacher. Perhaps being in the group and saying negative things about the teacher made the students more prone to saying negative things to the teacher, and being more defiant of him.

That I was not able to "control" the topics discussed during group meetings could be viewed as a negative consequence of the methodology that was adopted for this study. I often had questions that I hoped the group would address, but we always talked about what interested the students. This limited the organization and preplanning of the project and in revisiting previous group discussions. I could control my input in the group through critical reflection. I sometimes did this during group discussions by apologizing to the students for interrupting or explaining to them why I was interested in specific topics.

A Further Discussion of the Findings

The purpose of this section is to extend the findings presented in previous chapters. The discussion focuses on the themes established in the presentation of the findings: family influence, environment and empowerment. Here I critique some of the solutions suggested to improve education for disadvantaged students.

Family Influence

The influence of the family and the student's home life, has a major impact on a child's educational experience. Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1990) stated that formal bureaucratic strategies to educate disadvantaged youths have focused on low student performance and family background. They discussed and critiqued two strategies developed to improve education for the disadvantaged: providing school choice and raising standards for performance.

If students are to benefit from having a choice of schools parents must play an active role in their children's education. Choice provides parents with the option of sending their children to schools outside their district. Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1990) pointed out that this flexibility in school choice does not benefit disadvantaged students. Choice does not mean that all students have access to the high-quality schools. Choice creates competition for students. According to Natriello, McDill and Pallas, a school's reputation for success is based on "the quality of their students rather, than on their programs" (p. 185). It is unlikely that parents would want to send their children "to schools that are known for attracting and retaining disadvantaged students" (p. 186). Disadvantaged students have difficulty in gaining access to better schools because these school often require high marks for admittance. Moving children to a better school also

means transportation problems that are difficult to solve for parents of limited means. Moreover, many of these students have had a transient lifestyle and "the school may be a source of stability in their lives" (p. 186) so parents may not want to disrupt their lives with another move. Parents of disadvantaged students may not feel comfortable with becoming more involved in their children's education. Natriello, McDill and Pallas stated that parents of disadvantaged students "frequently have had unpleasant experiences with the schools and may not have the knowledge to make informed choices about their children's schooling" (p. 186). This was illustrated in my study when the immigrant children's parents did not want to complain about the teacher. Some were refugees and they did not want to create trouble at the school. Some of the parents did not speak English, and depended on translators to communicate with the teacher. The one mother who did complain to the teacher was single, unemployed, uneducated and Caucasian. She was not taken seriously by the teacher because, in his view, "Her attitude is as bad as the daughter." Perhaps in another school, or if the mother had been better educated, or if it had been a father who had complained, the complaints would have been attended to more seriously.

Most of the immigrant families who had moved out of this area, continued to send their children to this school. School choice may offer more affluent schools for their children, but the parents felt that the high immigrant population at this school made it safer for their children. There was racism present in the school, but it would be much more difficult for their children to attend a school without any students of colour. For these parents, the issue of safety was more important than the quality of education. Students from a low socioeconomic background may also feel out

of place in a more affluent school community. The discrepancies between the rich and the poor would become more obvious for low socioeconomic students if they attended school with more affluent students.

Environment

The environment had an impact on the educational expectations that these students had for themselves, and on the teachers' educational expectations for these students. The literature has shown that, traditionally, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are not expected to do well academically. And the teacher of the students in this study did not have very high educational expectations for these students. He predicted that the only students who would do well in school were the ones who left the area. One of the solutions for changing low educational expectations of students from low socioeconomic background is to raise academic standards. The presumption behind this solution is that, if more is expected of these students, then they will achieve more. But, the attempt to raise academic standards through the use of government standardized testing does not improve the educational opportunities of disadvantaged students. In fact, in most cases, raising academic standards works against improving the educational success of disadvantaged students.

Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1990) examined raising academic standards as a strategy for educating disadvantaged students. Natriello, McDill and Pallas explained that the "foremost strategy of educational reform in recent years has been raising standards for performance" (p. 187). The logic behind this strategy is that higher educational expectations benefit disadvantaged students. The problem with this logic is that it reduces the school's flexibility in curricular options. It also increases the

demands on disadvantaged students and the likelihood that they will ultimately drop out (p. 188).

Province-wide standardized tests increase the standards of academic performance, and create "additional barriers in the paths of the disadvantaged" (Natriello, McDill and Pallas, 1990, p. 190). Having students not doing well on standardized tests does not mean that the school system will "mobilize their resources to serve poorly performing students" (p. 190). The expectation is that the students will not do well on standardized tests. Therefore, the school system does not respond to students' failure. It merely affirms its assumptions. Both the teacher and the principal in this study told me that students from this area cannot be expected to do well on the mandatory government standardized tests. The principal explained that "There are just too many factors that affect their [academic] success: poverty, hunger, moving around, being unprepared when they start school. When they started school they are already behind students from other schools. What is the sense in giving them government tests?" The teacher made the argument that "Giving the same tests to all the schools is unfair. What will they find out, that students from poor schools don't do well?"

Raising standards of performance for disadvantaged students, ignores their environmental conditions. Standardized testing disadvantages the disadvantaged student even further.

Empowerment

Adams (1991) described empowerment as being a masculine enterprise because it "means becoming powerful" and implies attempts to gain control and power in a competitive and oppressive system (p. 194). Unless, he went on, empowerment "is a "child-ish" plea" which he

explained as student protests that are "acts of defiance rather than denial" (p. 194), when, "Pupils actually confirm the existence of the schooling against which they are rebelling" (p. 194). Adams' definition does not give credence to the form of empowerment that comes from the freedom or opportunity for an individual to talk about feelings, ideas and experiences. If empowerment is about power, then being able to express your thoughts can be powerful and, hence, empowering. In this study, empowerment meant students finding their voice. It entailed students saying what they thought and learning to reflect critically on who they were and their social position. Empowerment for the students in the study meant that they found their voice to say what they thought.

A difficulty with power in this study was that a white middle class academic researcher was assessing the situation. I was not poor or disadvantaged. My race, family background and academic standing ensure that I speak from a position of privilege. When I anticipated how the students in the study would be empowered, I thought it would be to make changes in the system that disenfranchised them. I was asking low socioeconomic students to first take on the task of critiquing the educational system and then to develop strategies to change the system. However, what they hoped to change in their lives was to move their social status from lower to middle class. As someone who claims to believe in social justice, I critique the inequities of social structures, but I do so from a position of privilege. Critical theory maintains that disadvantaged students should critique the status quo system and not aspire to be successful in such an oppressive system. The way to end their oppression is to fight this system. Is this fair? The lack of educational success of disadvantaged students is blamed on the conditions of poverty, such as the isolation factor

described in Chapter V. The onus for social reform is put on the disadvantaged students when it is expected that they become empowered enough to change their education. These are people who do not have influence and power in society, yet they are expected to change the structures of society.

Prior to conducting this study, I had participated in a panel discussion of society's understanding of Natives. The audience was made up of educated people who were interested in social justice issues, and professional people who felt an obligation to attend the discussion. I talked about the misinformed negative image that mainstream Canada has of life on reserves. My choice of topic was as a result of the reaction of most mainstream people when I talked of life on the reserve. Most people had preconceived ideas of the deprivation that existed on the reserve and believed that "these people" could do nothing to help themselves. I wanted this group of educated professionals to know that there were some Native people who went to university and became successful in the mainstream world. I talked about Natives who had overcome hardships and were able to achieve social and financial success. When I finished talking, a woman from the group challenged me on my viewpoint and wanted to know why I thought it was such a good thing that some Natives were successful in a society that oppressed them. Shouldn't I have critiqued their desire to succeed in this racist and oppressive society? This was a question that I had put to some "successful" Native adults myself. The response I was given was the response I gave to this woman: we were asking the oppressed to change the conditions of their oppression. I was told by Natives that this attitude was unfair because it was denying Natives access to a more financially secure middle class world. Mainstream Canadian society could not

determine or dictate the "right way" for Natives to live. The educational expectations of the students in this study was that education could provide them with the opportunity to leave the inner city and move to a middle class area. The empowerment they were seeking was to have the power to leave the inner city behind them. They understood that the world was unfair but they did not know how to change this; they just wanted to find security. The critique of social injustices from the position of low socioeconomic students may mean wanting to achieve a middle class position of privilege.

Recommendations for Practice

The recommendations for practice discussed in this section came primarily from the students in the group. They discussed ways to improve their school and their education. They also discussed the merits of participating in group discussions and providing students with the opportunity of expressing their voice. The literature on the education of disadvantaged students was a secondary source of recommendations for practice.

When I asked the students in the study how they would improve their school, their answers all concerned increased resources: "More colour computers." "More library books." "More teachers." "More room." Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1990) gave increased resources as a necessity for successfully educating the disadvantaged. They argued that additional resources are needed to enable special programs for the disadvantaged to serve all the children who need them. Reduced funding of programs for the disadvantaged has affected the number of children that could benefit from these programs. Increasing educational funds may not solve all of the academic problems of disadvantaged students but, as Natriello, McDill

and Pallas pointed out, "large sums of money have never been committed to schools serving disadvantaged youth" (p. 194). Schorr (1989) concurred with their assessment and said that breaking the cycle of the disadvantaged entails "extending effective programs [which address the needs of the disadvantaged youth], like Head Start, to all who are or should be eligible" and government and private institutions should ensure that "additional funds that will be needed to provide effective services to truly disadvantaged populations" (p. 293) be made available. She added that it must be understood that, when providing services for disadvantaged children, first-class services produce results: "Investing in the futures of disadvantaged children means investing in first-class services" (p. 193). She cited George Miller, the chairman of the U.S. House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, to explain her position on this: "When it comes to services for kids and families in poverty, where it is done in a first-class fashion, it succeeds beyond our wildest dreams. But everywhere we've tried to do it on the cheap, we ended up spending money with no appreciable results" (p. 194).

Another recommendation for practice is the use of group discussions to let the students' voices be heard. The students in the study said that being a participant in the group discussions meant that they could discuss their concerns and opinions. They felt that they were able to say what they wanted about school, and how it could be improved without worrying about the consequences of their honesty. They felt that all students could benefit from being in discussion groups because "You get to say what you want" and they were taken seriously. This was the first time that these students were given the opportunity to express their opinions on their education.

In their recommendations for improving the education of disadvantaged students, Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1990) suggested restructuring the linkages among the school, family and community as an effective way to use resources "so that they might make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged children" (p. 194). One way of restructuring the linkages is to shift "decision making to levels closer to the student [classroom and school level]" (p. 194). This requires having the input of students, parents, teachers and administration in school decisions. Connell (1993) gave an example of a disadvantaged school that decided to practice whole-school planning to improve the education of their students. The administrators of the school held "an awareness raising discussion period" in which questions about desired curriculum change "were put to the whole school community, parents, teachers and students" (p. 131). The advantage of this process is that people who have felt disenfranchised by education feel that they now have input. The students who participated in the study had definite ideas about their education, and believed their opinions would be invaluable in determining how they were to be educated. Listen to students, and they will tell you what they need.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study raised several questions about how students from a low socioeconomic area experience education. These questions suggest areas for further research.

The discussion of empowerment in this document raises questions about how to teach students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to think critically. If the students are living out stereotypes of poverty, then how do educators teach students about the oppression that they live under? How do teachers teach low socioeconomic students to fight the system that

educators help to reinforce? Further research on how to teach students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to think critically and the effect that this teaching may have on the students and education is needed. A further concern in this research is the necessity to examine teachers' biases towards critical education. Do mainstream teachers want to teach students to critique the system that employs them, and are middle class teachers qualified to do this? How do middle class teachers teach poor students about poverty?

This study found that family and community directly influence low socioeconomic students' understanding of education. Further research could examine the role parents and the community could play in the empowerment of students from a low socioeconomic background.

Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1990) and Schorr (1989) expressed the need for research to be done on evaluation of programs designed to improve the education of the disadvantaged. This research would help to establish the programs that truly work to improve the education of the disadvantaged (Natriello, McDill and Pallas, p. 198).
I would add to this recommendation that the voice of students should be included in the evaluation of these programs. This study has demonstrated the need to trust the voice of students in the development of their education.

Natriello, McDill and Pallas (1990) discussed the dilemma of using resources for research on the poor rather than on services for the poor. They made the argument that learning which programs are most effective will benefit the disadvantaged in the long run.

Finally. . .

During the first year of my doctoral program, I developed a preliminary sketch of my dissertation proposal. It was a requirement of one of my courses. I was somewhat unclear about how I was going to do my study, but I knew that I wanted to study children and poverty. I was warned that this study would be emotionally draining. I believe that it is not possible to study children who live in poverty and not be emotionally affected. I do not offer this as sufficient reason to avoid studies of children and poverty, but it stands as a caution to future researchers.

REFERENCES

Adams, R. (1991). *Protests by pupils: Empowerment, schooling and the state.* London: Falmer Press.

Apple, M. (1982). *Cultural and economic reproduction in education: Essays on class, ideology and the state.* New York: Routledge.

Apple, M. (1990). *Ideology and curriculum.* New York: Routledge.

Arciniegea, T. (1977). The challenge of multicultural education for teacher educators. *Journal of Research and Development in Education, 11* (1), 52-69.

Blackmore, J., & Kenway, J. (1993). *Gender matters in educational administration and policy: A feminist introduction.* London: The Falmer Press.

Borg, W., & Gall, M. (1989). *Educational research.* White Plains, NY: Longman.

Bowles, S., & Ginitis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and contradictions of economic life.* New York: Basic Books.

Briskin, L., & Coulter, R. P. (1992). Feminist pedagogy: Challenging the normative. *Canadian Journal of Education, 17(3),* 247-263.

Burrell, G., & Morgan, G. (1979). *Sociological paradigms and organizational analysis.* London: Heinemann.

Burstyn, J. (1993). Critical pedagogy and the feminist perspective. In J. Perkinson (Ed.), *Teachers without goals/ students without purposes* (pp. 101-109). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Canadian Teachers' Association (1989). *Children, schools and poverty.* Ottawa, ON: Author.

Carr, W. & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge and action research.* London: Falmer Press.

Carson, T. (1989). Collaboratively inquiring into action research. In T. Carson & D. Sumara (Eds.), *Exploring Collaborative Action Research.* (pp. i-ix). Proceedings of the ninth Invitational Conference of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies. Jasper, AB.

Cohen, M. (1986). Intrinsic motivation in the special education classroom. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 19* (5), 258-261.

Coles, R. (1989). *The call of stories: Teaching and the moral imagination.* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Connell, R. W. (1993). *Schools and social justice.* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

de Saint-Exupéry, A. (1943). *The Little Prince.* Orlando, FA: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Diver-Stamnes, C. (1995). *Lives in the balance: Youth, poverty and education in Watts.* Albany, NY: State University of New York.

Eliot, T. S. (1944). *Four Quartets 'Little Gidding' Part 5.* London: Faber.

Forsyth, P., & Tallerico, M. (1993). *City schools.* Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press.

Foster, W. (1986). *Paradigms and promises.* Buffalo, NY: Prometheus.

Freire, P. (1971). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Herder and Herder.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: reading the word and the world.* Boston, MA: Bergin & Garvey.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1993). A dialogue with Paulo Freire. In P. McLaren, and P. Leonard (Eds.), *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter* (p. 169-176). London: Routledge.

Giroux, H. A. (1992). *Border crossing: Cultural workers and the politics of education.* New York: Routledge.

Gitlin, A. (1991). Educative research, voice, and school change. *Harvard Educational Review, 60* (4), 443-466.

Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers.* White Plains, NY: Longman.

Gospel of St. Luke (1968). *The Jerusalem bible.* A. Jones (Ed.). New York: Doubleday.

Guba, E. G. (1978). *Toward a methodology of naturalistic inquiry in educational evaluation.* Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Centre for the Study of Evaluation.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1982). Epistemological and methodological bases of naturalistic inquiry. *Educational Communication and Technology Journal, (30)* 233-252.

Heaney, S. (1990). *New selected poems.* London: Faber and Faber.

hooks, b. (1991). Essentialism and experience. *American Literary History, 3* (1), 172-83.

hooks, b. (1993). bell hooks speaking about Paulo Freire: The man, his work. In P. McLaren, and P. Leonard (Eds.), *A critical encounter*(p.p. 146-154). London: Routledge.

Hullihan, W. F. (1993). It takes a village to raise a child. *The Journal of Educational Thought, 27*(3), 347-352.

Jencks, C. (1979). *Who gets ahead?* New York: Basic Books.

Johnson, J. (1991). *Student voice.* Eugene, OR: Oregon School Study Council.

Jones, F. E., & Selby, J. (1972). *Poverty and the child.* Toronto, ON: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.

Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (Eds.). (1988). *The action research planner.* Victoria, AU: Deakin University Press.

Kreisberg, S. (1992). *Transforming power: Domination, empowerment and education.* New York: State University of New York.

Leacock, E. B. (1971). *The culture of poverty.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Lemann, N. (1986). The origins of the underclass. *Atlantic Monthly, 257*(6), 31-55.

Levin, H. M. (1985). *The educationally disadvantaged: A national crisis.* Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance, School of Education, Stanford University.

Lincoln, Y. S. (1990). Toward a categorical imperative for qualitative research. In E. Eisner, and A. Peshkin (Eds.) *Qualitative inquiry in education: The continuing debate* (pp. 277-295). New York: Teacher College Press.

Lincoln, Y.S., & Denzin, Y. (1994). *Handbook of qualitative research.* London: Sage Publications.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* London: Sage Publications.

Luke, C., & Gore, J. (1992). *Feminism and critical pedagogy.* New York: Routledge.

Lutz, F., & Iannaccone, L. (1995). The governance of local schools as influenced by social class, race and ethnicity. In S. Rothstein (Ed.), *Class, culture and race in American schools.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Maynes, W. G. (1990). *The education of Edmonton's urban poor: A policy perspective.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Edmonton AB: University of Alberta.

McLaren, P. (1989). *Life in schools.* Oxford, OH: Irwin.

McLaren, P., & Leonard, P. (1993). *Paulo Freire: A critical encounter.* London: Routledge.

Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Mitchell, A. (1997, April 18). The poor fare worst in schools. *The Globe and Mail,* p. A2.

Natriello, G., McDill, E., & Pallas, A. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children.* New York: Columbia University Teachers College Press.

Oishi, K. (1974). *Perceptions of inner city educational practices.* Unpublished master's thesis. University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB.

Okun, M. A., Fisk, E. C., & Brandt, E. A. (1983). Dialectics, ethnography and educational research. In B. Bain (Ed.), *The sociogenesis of language and human conduct.* New York: Plenum.

Olson, P. (1995). Poverty and education in Canada. In R. Gnosh and D. Ray (Eds.), *Social change and education in Canada.* Toronto, ON: Harcourt Brace.

Patton, M. R. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Paul, R. (1992). Critical thinking: What, why and how. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 77*(20), 3-24.

Perez, B., & Torres-Guzman, M. E. (1992). *Learning in two worlds.* New York: Longman.

Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice.* New York: Random House.

Robinson, H. (1994). *The ethnography of empowerment.* London: Falmer Press.

Rothstein, S. (1995). *Class, culture and race in American schools.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Ryan, T. J. (1972). *Poverty and the child.* Toronto, ON: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.

Schmuck, P., & Schmuck, R. (1991). The attitudes of adolescents in small-town America. *NASSP Bulletin,* 85-95.

Schorr, L. (1989). *Within our reach.* New York: Anchor Books.

Schorr, L., & Schorr, D. (1996). Within our reach breaking the cycle of disadvantage. In J. Grosenick and D. Close (Eds.), *Educational and social issues.* Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Schwandt, T. (1989). Solutions to the paradigm conflict: Coping with uncertainty. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 17,* 379-407.

Shor, I., & Freire, P. (1987). *A pedagogy for liberation.* New York: Bergin and Garvey.

Solnicki, J. (1992). *The real me is gonna be a shock: A year in the life of a front-line teacher.* Toronto, ON: Allyn & Bacon.

Spring, J. (1991). *American education: An introduction to social and political aspects.* New York: Longman.

Stake, R. E. (1980). *Seeking sweet water: Case studies in educational research.* Washington, DC: AERA.

Statistics Canada (1988). *The poor in Canada.* Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada.

Stevens, E., & Wood, G. H. (1987). *Justice, ideology, and education.* New York: Random House.

Sumara, D. (1994). *Influence of hermeneutics and postmodernism in conducting an action research project.* Discussion notes for presentation in Secondary Education 606. Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta.

Tripp, D. (1990). Socially critical action research. *Theory Into Practice, 29*(3), 158-166.

Waxman, C. I. (1986). *The stigma of poverty: A critique of poverty theories and policies.* New York: Pergamon.

Weiler, K. (1988). *Women teaching for change.* New York: Bergin & Garvey.

Whitehead, B. (1993). Dan Quayle was right. *Atlantic Monthly, 271*(4), 47-84.

Willis, G. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs.* Farnborough, EN: Saxon Press.

Wilson, W. (1987). *The culture of poverty.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Young, J. (1990). Equality of opportunity: reality or myth? In Titley, B. (Ed.), *Canadian education: historical themes and contemporary issues.* Calgary, AB: Detselig.